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Opening Extract from...

Heart-Shaped Bruise

Written by Tanya Byrne

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TANYA BYRNE

Heart- Shaped Bruise

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Last year, the psychiatric unit of Archway Young Offenders Institution was closed. A notebook was found in one of the rooms. The contents are as follows . . .

Juliet,

I know you've been waiting three months for this letter, but I have to start by saying that this isn't an apology. I'm not sorry. I'm not. If I have to spend the rest of my life crossing that word out of every dictionary I find, I will. So, if that's what you've been waiting for me to say, why you keep writing to me, stop reading now.

This is the only letter I'm going to write you, and the only reason I'm writing it is because you keep asking me why I did what I did. I guess you don't believe them when they say that I'm out of my mind. I don't know. I might be. My normal and everyone else's normal isn't the same any more. Mine is out of time, like I'm a record playing at the wrong speed or something. That's why I'm letting them do this to me, why I swallow their

pills and sit here, scratching my sins into the walls.

But that's not why I did it. You must know that, otherwise you wouldn't be asking. So, okay, you want to know why? This is why: you stabbed my father. That's it. What don't you understand? China shop rules, Juliet: you break it, you pay for it, and you broke me. You got what you deserved.

Now leave me alone.

Emily

That was the only thing I was supposed to write in this notebook. When Doctor Gilyard gave it to me yesterday, she told me to write the letter to Juliet and give it back when I was ready.

I was going to, but, earlier, while I was hiding a cigarette on top of my wardrobe, I found a letter to someone called Will. I know I shouldn't have, but I read it and – *my heart*. I didn't think it still worked, but I felt it again, all hot and red and heavy in my chest.

I don't know why the letter is still here; it's in an envelope with the address on it and everything. Maybe the girl who wrote it – Sonia, who loves Will, and slept in this bed before me – forgot to take it with her when she left. Or maybe she was too scared to send it. I'm not. That's the first thing I'm going to do

when I get out of here, because Will, whoever he is, deserves to know how much he's loved.

God knows, no one will ever love me like that. Not now.

So I found Will's letter on top of the wardrobe and you found this notebook there, too, and that's the way it should be, I think. Everywhere I go I try to leave a piece of myself behind. I'll never be lost because there are bits of me scattered all over London; compliments written on the back of Starbucks receipts, secrets scribbled in public toilets. It's like I'm everywhere, all at once. Waitresses will think of me and smile. Bathroom walls will remember me. I'll live for ever.

You should try it – leave something on top of the wardrobe before you go. If there's something you want to say to someone but you can't, write it down and leave it behind for someone else to read. That's why I'm writing this now. It's easier this way, kind of like how you can tell the stranger sitting next to you on the bus all of your secrets, but you can't tell your best friend because best friends never forget.

So, here we go, I'll be me and you be the stranger on the bus.

This isn't a journal. I'm eighteen; I don't have the patience for journals any more. I don't have the patience for straight lines, either. I tend to avoid them. So don't expect this to be all this-happened-then-this-happened-then-this-happened because my brain doesn't work like that. You'd be bored anyway.

As for what you do with this notebook, that's up to you. Tell the nurses, tell Doctor Gilyard. I don't care. You can even put it back on top of the wardrobe and pretend you never saw it if you want. But I need to say this, to be rid of it. I can't keep carrying it around with me; I'm buckling under the weight of it. I look at myself sometimes, at the broken lines across the palms of my hands and the creases in my elbows, and I can see myself coming apart at the seams.

Like today, with Doctor Gilyard. I never speak first. Never.

I've seen her once a week since I got here and I haven't said a word without being prompted. But this morning, I sat down and before she even opened her notebook, I said: 'I know what you think of me.'

It came from nowhere, I swear. For a moment I thought I meant it, that I'd turned the corner she'd been dragging me towards. But then she took her glasses off and as she did, I saw her fingers flutter and I realised that I did that to her – I did that – and some imbalance in the universe tipped back in my direction.

'What do I think of you, Emily?' she asked, but it was too late, the moment was gone; I'd faltered, but I'd still scored the first point.

It was cruel, I suppose. She must have thought it was a breakthrough because I watched her cheeks go pink as she waited for me to respond. I wonder if she was holding her breath, hoping that I would finally collapse into a broken, sobbing heap at her feet. But I turned my face away.

'It's okay, you can say it.'

'Say what, Emily?'

'You know what.'

'What's that, Emily?'

'Why won't you say it?'

'Why won't *you* say it, Emily?'

Always a question with a question.

My fingers curled around the arms of the chair. 'Can I smoke?'

'Do you have any cigarettes?'

She knew I didn't have any cigarettes. The nurses have them

and we're only allowed four a day; one after breakfast, one after lunch, one after dinner and one before bed. I was furious about it when first I got here, but it's for my own good, apparently. That's what this place is about, *establishing routines*. I get up at the same time, shower at the same time, eat at the same time, go to bed at the same time.

My life is a song I listen to on repeat.

I think I'm supposed to find it comforting, the consistency of it all. This is normal, I'm told. This is what normal teenage girls do – they sleep for eight hours and take their make-up off every night. They don't call their mates for a chat at 3 a.m.

That's all normal is, you know, a habit I have to relearn.

Crazy is a habit I have to break.

'You used to let me smoke.'

She did, when I first got here and we would sit in her office for hours – hours and hours – suffocating on the silence. She would put the box on the coffee table between us and she wouldn't say anything, but I knew that if I said something, I could have one. So I would tell her things, tiny things. Cigarette-long confessions to distract her from the things I didn't want her to write in that notebook of hers.

'I don't have any cigarettes, Emily.'

I stood up then. I do that a lot, walk around her office. It's as though I have to see everything, touch everything. Trail my fingers along her desk and over the books on her shelf as though I'm counting each one.

'Is this what's wrong with me?' I asked her during our first

session, plucking a textbook on adolescent schizophrenia off the shelf and holding it up. 'Am I mad?'

When she didn't respond, I put it back, next to a textbook on sleeping disorders before moving along the row. 'How about this?' I said, pulling out another and looking at the cover. '*Personality Disorders: A Practical Guide*.' I glanced across the office at her, but she just lifted her chin, her shoulders perfectly still and straight.

I began flicking through the book, stopping at a chapter about borderline personality disorder. 'This could be me,' I told her as I read the symptoms. 'My emotions go up and down, don't they? Me and every other teenage girl. I guess we're all nutters.'

When I turned to her with a smug smile, she nodded. 'Why don't you read the rest?'

I looked down at the page – *difficulty in making and maintaining relationships . . . unstable sense of identity . . . taking risks without thinking about the consequences* – and snapped the book shut. 'Nah. It's boring. Got anything with vampires in it?'

Doctor Gilyard just smiled. And she just smiled today as I walked over to her desk and began opening the drawers. There was nothing in the first one; a few Biro's, a neon-pink highlighter. There was a silver tube of hand cream in the second one and I stopped and stared at it. I couldn't picture Doctor Gilyard doing something as normal as using hand cream. In fact, I don't think I've even seen her stand up. In my head, when I leave her office, she sits there until I go back in the following week. She

doesn't leave. She doesn't walk or eat or worry about what to wear in the morning.

The half-empty box of cigarettes was in the last drawer and I took one out and lit it with the lighter that was in the drawer next to it. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. It tasted disgusting – I didn't even want it – but when I went back to my chair, smoke trailing behind me, a scoreboard somewhere registered another point.

'What was it that you wanted me to say, Emily?' Doctor Gilyard continued as though those last few minutes hadn't happened. She just stepped over them.

I looked at the end of the cigarette and blew on it. 'That I'm evil.'

'Are you evil, Emily?'

'Isn't that what they say about me?'

She took off her glasses and looked at me. 'Who says that you're evil?'

'Everyone.' Juliet. The police. The newspapers. The girls I barely know from school who sigh and shake their heads on the six o'clock news and say they always knew there was something not quite right about me.

'Is that why you won't talk about what happened, Emily, because you think I already know what happened?'

'You do know what happened.'

She put her glasses back on and scribbled something in her notebook. I wanted to lean over and rip it from her, to read what she was saying about me. She has one for each of us, apparently.

I imagine them sometimes, lined up in a row in a room, all of these secrets sitting on a shelf like dusty jars of jam.

‘You know everything about me,’ I told her.

She looked up again. ‘Do I?’

‘What you don’t know, you can Google.’

‘Is that who you are, Emily, what other people say about you?’

‘That’s all any of us are.’ I shrugged and took a drag on the cigarette. ‘The person people remember when you leave the room. You can’t be any more than that.’

‘So what do I remember about you, Emily?’

‘What I did.’

‘What did you do?’

‘You know what I did.’ I tried to control the tremor in my voice but we both heard it. I was furious with myself. She does that every time. It’s like she wants me to keep saying it, over and over, as though if I keep saying it, I’ll believe it. I’ll be sorry.

‘I know what you were arrested for, Emily.’

I tapped the ash from my cigarette on to the floor. ‘What else is there?’

‘You tell me.’

My gaze edged towards hers again. ‘Why do you want to know?’

Her eyes dipped to the notebook. ‘I want to help you understand why you did what you did, Emily.’

‘I know why I did it.’

‘Okay.’ She nodded. ‘Why did you do it?’

I could have given it to her then, the letter to Juliet. I could

have told her that Juliet made me do it, that I used to be like every other teenage girl, that I was stubborn and restless and melodramatic and said the wrong thing sometimes and broke mirrors and misheard lyrics, but I still sang, even though the words were wrong. That I threw coins in fountains and made wishes at 11.11 because I thought that if I wanted something, all I had to do was ask for it. And I asked, not for world peace or money or good health or any of those things other people wish for. I asked to be special. I wanted to be the sort of girl boys wrote books about, the sort of girl boys sang songs about.

I think I could have been, but then Juliet stabbed my father and I couldn't be me any more. I turned into someone else, into this hard, angry, *miserable* girl who did the most terrible things. Things that made people take a step back when I walked into a room.

That's what you won't find on Google, I wanted to tell Doctor Gilyard today. *Who I used to be*.

But I didn't because she'd never get that, would she? She'd never get that sometimes we do things that are so big – so awful – that they just become who we are. It's like you do it and *BOOM* everything is blown to bits.

I guess if you're here too, then you know how that feels.

I'm laughing now, as I'm writing this, because I don't even know who you are but I think you understand me better than anyone else I know. After all, isn't that why we're here, you and me? Because we're broken?

Saturday. Art therapy. We had to paint how we were feeling so I balled up my piece of paper and threw it at the therapist. I'm not allowed to have a cigarette for the rest of the day.

Saturday is also Visitors' Day so Naomi (17, schizophrenic) is having her weekly shit fit. I'm writing this from the TV Room because there aren't enough nurses to deal with Naomi's histrionics and keep an eye on us too, so we've been corralled into the TV Room to watch a film like we're two years olds. I half want to wander into the corridor weeping about how it isn't worth it any more just to see how they would react.

The new girl, Lily (16, anorexic), keeps looking at me with this sad little smile as though she's waiting for me to tell her that it's going to be okay, but I won't smile back because why should

I be the one to tell her that it won't be? If she doesn't know that already, being in this place, then I can't help her.

If you can't read the tail end of that sentence, it's because Naomi just broke something – something glass – and we all jumped. I say *all*, Val (17, bipolar) didn't budge. She just sat there, staring at the television. But that's Val; once she sits in front of the telly, she doesn't move. You can go over to her and slap her across the face and she won't notice, but turn it over when *Deal or No Deal* is on and she'll pull you apart, bone by bone.

Naomi's just broken something else. She does this *every time* her boyfriend comes to visit; she sees him, feels her heart again, and thinks she's better. Then when it's time to take her meds, she screams blue bloody murder. That's why I won't let anyone visit me. Not that there is anyone to visit me; Dad's in prison and Mum's – well, I don't know where Mum is. Wherever she is, she isn't thinking about me, so I won't waste any more ink on her.

Naomi just roared, 'I'm fine! I'm in love, I don't need drugs!', so it won't be long until she threatens to kill herself and they sedate her, which is good, because we're having spag bol for dinner. I don't do much willingly here, but I'm first in the queue for spag bol.

I just had to stop writing because the new girl approached me.

'Are you her? Are you Emily Koll?' she asked, her eyes wide.

I'm not wearing my YES, IT'S ME, EMILY KOLL T-shirt today so I nodded.

She took that as her cue to sit next to me and as she did, I looked at her, at the gold crucifix around her neck and her unbrushed brown hair. She looked so fragile, as though her clothes were the only things holding her together, but she was bold enough to sit next to me without being asked, so I had to give her that. She's braver than most of the girls in here.

'You're not what I expected,' she told me with a whisper.

I made a show of rolling my eyes and snapping this notebook shut because what could I say? It wasn't a compliment, was it?

'You're blond.'

I am blond. That's what surprises people the most when they come here. They expect to meet the red-lipped, red-haired girl they've seen in the papers. But they find me – tiny, blond, doll-faced me – and they stare at me as though they've been betrayed. They want the wild redhead. Tiny blonde girls don't do what I did.

'Is it true? Did you really do that to that girl Juliet?' she asked.

She was breathless and I love and hate that, how people are in awe of me and terrified of me, all at once. So I smiled at her. 'Don't believe everything you read.'

You shouldn't either, by the way.