

The Safety Net

Here he is at last – the man I’ve been waiting for. Physically, he is exactly right: about six feet tall, short dark hair, broad shouldered and heavy without being fat, no facial hair. He is perfect in every detail.

If that sounds romantic, it’s not meant to. There’s nothing romantic about my state of mind at the moment, as I sit here gripping my glass of red wine, crying, staring at the television screen.

I’ve been waiting for this man for four and a half years. This particular man, not just one of any number of men. Of course, there was a time when he was not ‘this particular man’, though he had the potential to become him. The transformation took place on 22 January 2011. At half past midnight.

I haven’t known his name for the past four and a half years, and I still don’t. All I knew was that he needed to be of the physical type I have described. His personality didn’t matter, as long as it was the kind that might commit a violent crime. Murder, ideally.

No, sorry, that’s wrong. The man I needed wasn’t someone who was merely capable of killing; I was waiting for an actual murderer, someone who had killed already. His choice of victim mattered too. If, for example, he was a drug-fuelled waster who had killed another drug-fuelled waster in a street fight, that wouldn’t have been any good for my purposes – that killer would not have been the one I was waiting for. No, I needed someone whose victim had been harmless and innocent – female, too, ideally, so that the crime was as abhorrent as a murder could be. I was waiting for an evil man who had killed a helpless woman, or even a child – perhaps someone so evil that he was beyond hope of redemption.

Over the years, this idea has terrified me so much that, many times, I have considered abandoning my plan. A voice inside me kept screaming, ‘I don’t want anything to do with that sort of person.’ Time and time again, I had to remind myself that I wouldn’t need to have anything to do with him, once I found him. There would be no contact whatsoever between us; I wouldn’t even find out his name, if I was lucky.

If I’m lucky, I will feel better once I’ve done this. That’s all I want: to feel better. I don’t know if it’s possible, but I have to try.

My final requirement was that the murder had to have been committed in or near Nottingham. So many specifics that needed to be in alignment – to be honest, I’m surprised I’ve only had to wait four and a half years; I expected it to be more like ten.

Anyway, I’ve found him now, which is all that matters. He’s where I always knew he would be: on the television news. I stare at the police artist’s sketch of him, and listen as Rosemary Vickers, a Detective Superintendent with Nottinghamshire Police, describes what he did: on 22 January, at half past midnight, he attacked and killed eighteen-year-old Nadine

McGahan in a park in Nottingham. I try not to listen too closely to the details of what he did to her; I would have nightmares if I allowed myself to think about it.

I think instead about my ex, Owen, who dumped me five years ago, making sure to tell me everything he'd found unattractive and unappealing about me during our two-year relationship. I haven't been able to like myself since, even though most of the things he said were lies. My friends think it's crazy – if I know he was talking rubbish, why let it get to me? I never explain to anybody - it's too humiliating - but there is a perfectly rational explanation: true or not, the fact that the person closer to me than anyone in the world wanted to hurt me enough to say all those things has to mean something about me, something I'd rather not put into words, even to myself.

Shortly after our break-up, Owen moved to Nottingham. He is not quite six feet tall, not as broad-shouldered as the man the police artist has drawn, and the nose is different, but there's enough of a resemblance. I pick up the phone, dial the number that Rosemary Vickers is urging me and millions of other viewers to dial if we know anything.

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Things have moved quickly – or maybe it only seems so to me, after my years-long wait. There's a female detective in my living room. 'Tell me everything you know about Owen Trinder,' she says. I tell her he's a primary school teacher, that in his spare time he does something called 'geo-cacheing', which he described to me many times but I never entirely understood. He's 43, originally from Doncaster. She asks some questions I wasn't expecting: what alcoholic drinks did he drink when I knew him? Did he smoke? Was our sex life normal? Was he ever violent towards me? I don't bother to ask whether breaking my heart in a particularly hurtful way counts as violence; I say no. And finally, the big question: how certain am I that the man in the police artist's sketch is Owen?

'It's him,' I say. I planned to extend my lie and say that when I knew Owen, he often wore a black-and-orange zip-up coat exactly like the one the man in the police artist's sketch is wearing, but I decide against it. That's something that could be proved to be untrue. Owen didn't wear a coat like that, ever, and people who knew him when I did might come forward to say so. Whereas no one can prove that my belief that one man's face resembles another's is a lie; it often happens that one person spots a resemblance that another can't see even once it's been pointed out. I will always be able to pretend, convincingly, that I looked at the face in the sketch and saw Owen's features.

'You're sure it's Owen Trinder?' the detective asks.

'There's no doubt in my mind,' I say.

She nods. 'Very interesting,' she says, with a small smile.

Oh, God, oh, no. What have I done?

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It is two days since the detective's visit and I am in hell. She said she'd keep me informed, but I haven't heard from her, and she isn't returning my calls. What did her smile mean? Did she know I was lying? How could she possibly?

Am I being punished for what I've done? When I planned it, it didn't seem so bad: follow the news, follow *Crimewatch*, wait for a man in Nottingham who looks superficially like Owen to commit a brutal crime, then tell the police I think Owen might have done it, based on the photofit I saw on TV. They would question him, he would produce his alibi and a DNA sample, and be off the hook, with no permanent harm done.

I wanted to give him a shock, that's all – I wanted him to suffer in proportion to the suffering he'd caused me. I decided that to be suspected, briefly, of having committed a horrific crime – to fear, however fleetingly, that, in spite of your innocence, you might be charged, tried, found guilty, imprisoned, hated by everyone in the country – would cause approximately the same amount of distress as being dumped in the precise way that I was by Owen. Less, even, because it would be over much sooner.

And I had a safety net in place: if for some reason the police took too long to eliminate Owen from their enquiries, I would confess to my lie. I wouldn't let him suffer that level of fear for more than a few days, a week maximum. What's one week compared with five years of feeling worthless?

I've come up against a problem I didn't anticipate, however: the police aren't keeping me updated. I realize it was naïve of me to assume they would. *Thank you so much for your help, Miss Elstow – yes, of course we'll make sure you're fully briefed at every stage as our investigation progresses.*

How will I know if I need to confess if they don't tell me what's going on?

And why did the detective smile in that funny way? Why did she say, 'Very interesting'?

I've done something terrible. If I could undo it, I would, but I can't.

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The doorbell rings. I leap up, assuming it's the detective who interviewed me, but it isn't. It's Owen. I have dreamed about this happening, except that in my dreams he isn't angry, as he is now in real life. My dream Owen says he's sorry – he still loves me, was a fool to think he could live without me.

Angry real Owen says, 'It was you, wasn't it? You twisted, evil...'

'I'm sorry,' I say, and I burst into tears .

‘Lucky for me, I had two friends who told the police I was with them in a club at the relevant time.’

‘I’m so sorry, Owen. I don’t know what came over me, I just...’

‘You thought I was capable of doing that? To a woman?’

He sees the expression on my face, listens to my silence. That’s when the truth hits him; I watch it land, like a physical blow. And I hate myself even more, because, even as I’m apologizing, I’m still lying. How can I say, ‘I don’t know what came over me?’, as if it was a sudden impulse, when I’ve been planning this for years?

‘I see,’ Owen nods, seeming calmer now. ‘You knew it wasn’t me, but you rang the police and said it was.’

I just wanted our story to end in a better way, in a way that my pride could live with: he broke her heart, left her in pieces, but she had the last laugh: she decided the whole sewing-prawns-into-curtain-linings thing was so five minutes ago, and went one better – she manipulated the police into suspecting him of murder. I actually imagined people saying this to one another, awe-struck admiration in their voices. I guess when you spend as much time on your own as I have over the past few years, your fantasy world starts to seem more real than reality.

I have to try to make it up to him.

‘I don’t hate you, Owen,’ I say shakily. ‘I swear I don’t. Sometimes, when people hurt each other – like when you said all those vicious things when you left – it’s because of hate, but sometimes it’s love, love in pain that lashes out and...’

‘You know the funny thing?’ Owen talks over me. ‘You weren’t the only one.’

His words stop me in my tracks. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Another woman rang the police and said the guy in the sketch was me – even though so many details were wrong – he was too thick-set, his nose was bigger. Personally, I didn’t see the resemblance.’

‘But...why...?’ *Why would anyone do that, unless they were me?*

Owen smiles. ‘I know what you’re thinking: did I dump her too, and did she have the same idea as you? Unlikely.’

‘Then what...?’

‘Like I said, I was lucky: my two best mates were willing to tell the police I was with them when Nadine McGahan was murdered.’

I breathe in sharply. And then I find I can’t breathe, in or out. He didn’t say ‘willing to’, not the first time. Why would he say ‘willing to’, unless...?

He lifts his sweater, starts to pull his belt out from the loops of his trousers. ‘I reckon I’ve got about another day, while they process my DNA sample.’ As he walks towards me, I can’t look away from his eyes: two bottomless chips of ice in his contorted face. ‘How long do you reckon you’ve got?’ he says.