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FRUIT FLY

JOSH SILVER



MAGPIE
BOOKS

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Part 1

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1

Leo

Three days no sleep
Smack's sweet.
The aftertaste
I will push away
As long as I am able.
But it is coming –
The crest of its wave on my horizon
Ready to plummet,
Ready to drown.
It is less poetic now.
More
A bin lid
Closing
On my world of mangled shit.

@Alias22

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2

Mallory

As I start up my sixth game of Candy Crush while sat on the closed toilet seat, I have a very clear and rational realisation.

I, too, am a piece of exploding computerised fruit.

That is the extent of me. Here one moment, only to be pulverised into a spray of sweet nothing the very next. Obliterated. Forgotten.

Outside, I can hear the voices of my guests and the music droning on. *Why won't they leave?*

The truth is, if I did explode, I don't think they'd notice. At least not at first. They would pretend that they cared – at my funeral. That I was important to them. That I had made a mark on their lives in some beautiful and profound way. But they would lie.

One of them lied earlier. A woman I have met only once.

'*Mallory is basically Clarissa Dalloway*,' she proclaimed loudly to my kitchen full of arty (pretentious) intellectual types, pointing in my direction with a mouthful of hummus. Hummus I had bought from Tesco and put in the poshest-looking bowl I could find. I'd sprinkled some coriander on top and pretended I'd made it. (I suppose I lie too. But it's different.) '*Clarissa Fucking Dalloway*,' she repeated, whilst pulling a face like the mouthful was precipitating an orgasm. I swallowed my jealousy. I haven't had an orgasm in years, let alone one triggered by Tesco's own-brand hummus. '*Mallory throws the best parties in North London.*'

Today is the first time this woman has stepped foot inside my house.

LBDS | Mcnaughton books

But I laughed obligingly. And the guests all agreed, crowded round my kitchen island, nodding, a bobbing sea of wire-rimmed glasses, trilbies, rolled up cigarettes tucked behind ears (lobes studded with hoops and dangling crosses). Everyone defying the vape trend because they are too real, too hardcore and altogether too brilliant to care about lung cancer, like their Tate Modern memberships and Birkenstocks somehow make them immune.

Some even clapped. I waved them off, like they were being silly. *No, no. I am nothing like Mrs Dalloway.* But I wouldn't actually know. I have never read *Mrs Dalloway*, despite pretending to be well-versed in the literary greats so often that I've almost convinced myself I have. What is actually true is that I googled the synopsis – like I do with most of the classics – binged on an overview of the themes and style on Wikipedia, mentally crammed in some sentences that sounded important and now just recite them at people. It seems to have worked. I can even quote bits.

She sliced like a knife through everything.

That's a good one.

'Mal?'

I move my finger across my screen with utter precision, slaying five yellow Jelly Tots in a row. I watch them detonate, the vibrations of my phone tingle my fingers in such a satisfying rhythm that I make an audible gasp.

'Mal, are you in there?'

I do have to be careful. Virginia Woolf comes up annoyingly often within the conversations of this wannabe Bloomsbury set, like she has been adopted as some kind of Mother Figure (*she's a style icon, a homeware influencer, just a total fucking mood*). And so, I bought an early edition of *Mrs Dalloway* from eBay for more than the price of an iPad, bent the pages and put it in the downstairs bathroom – where I am currently sat. It is placed for everyone to see: right on top of the pile of neatly (strategically) arranged books on the shelf, next to the peace lily and the bougie scented candle that smells strongly like lavender, perfectly masking the stench of my deception.

You'd think I'd just read the thing.

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She felt very young, and at the same time, unspeakably aged.

Another good one.

I can see it in front of me. Its forcibly broken spine.

My lies, bent into unread pages.

We all lie.

'Mal, are you in there?'

Virginia Woolf killed herself with stones in her pockets. I may not have technically read her books, but I do know that much.

'*Mal!*'

It's romantic, isn't it? Suicide. There is something romantic about it. Sometimes. Not always. Not the ones on the train tracks or in the wardrobes with ties and belts. More the ones in the forests or rivers or lakes. The peaceful ones. I think so.

If I admitted that to my guests, maybe they would leave. Which is what I want.

'Mallory?' My husband's gruff Irish lilt through the door. Fuck's sake. 'Mal, Joanie is asking where we keep the Jäger.'

We have Jäger because we are still young and cool. Effortlessly. That's important.

'I'm just in the bathroom, darling.' I never call him darling unless other people are around to hear it. I take my glass of champagne and down the remainder of its contents. I'm not drunk enough.

He is so handsome. So sexy. Everyone tells me. My knees still go weak. They do.

They do.

'I swear it was in the cupboard in the kitchen island?' He is slurring.

'No, it's above the—'

Damn it. I died.

In Candy Crush, not in reality. 'I'll be two minutes!'

I stand and press the flush, for effect. The water runs as I turn the tap, but I don't wet my hands. I just stare at myself in the mirror above the sink.

I look like I belong here.

'OK, love.' I hear a thud on the back of the door. His head?

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'OK.' His voice, barely audible through the wood, like his mouth is pressed against it. '...I'm horny.'

This mirror is distressed. That's what the man at Neptune's furniture store told me. '*This is a distressed mirror.*' I have tried so often to find its emotional anguish, to relate. But all it means is that the glass is purposefully tarnished to the point where you can't really see yourself in it at all. I hate this mirror, but everyone says how cool it is.

My mirror is cool, like my house, my husband and our Jäger.

'Did you hear me, Mal?'

Yes, I heard you. Yes, I fucking heard you. 'Sorry?'

'I'm horny...'

Jäger bombs in a three-floor semi, giving him a semi, in Crouch End at ten p.m. on a Friday night.

This is my life.

My life is enviable.

I have it all.

I turn away from my reflection and open the latch on the door. He stumbles towards me, pushing me back in. 'Ronan...'

'We can be quick.' He kicks the door shut behind him with the back of his foot.

'But the guests—'

He nuzzles into my neck, the back of my thighs now pressing into the top of the sink. His face appears in front of me: his intentionally scruffy stubble, ever enduring hairline, heavy brow and bright-green eyes, which are now gone, lost, blurred by a concoction of clumsy lust and unpronounceable Scottish whiskey. 'Baby...' My skin prickles. He never calls me baby, unless his eyes look like this. 'Just quickly...' His fingers graze my jeans, the inside of my thigh. He never does that either, unless his eyes look like this. 'You're amazing.'

I've trained myself not to flinch now. Every time.

I make a small moan, because I know I should.

Thankfully the moan is short-lived, broken off by someone's voice: neither mine nor his. 'Oh God!'

The door has swung open and Joanie is stood there, frozen and flushed, half in, half out, glass of Chardonnay in hand.

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Ronan turns his head away from my neck, affording me some momentary relief. 'Oh shit – Joanie, sorry—'

'No! Please – you two crack on!' she says, turning on the spot, hand moving over her mouth, eyes wide.

'Joanie—' I begin.

'God! No. Not at all. *You two*. You two are such…' She stalls. '*Fun*.'

'We're coming out.'

Joanie laughs, like this is all funny. *My life is fun and funny*. 'It's just – people are waiting for Ronan's speech.'

Ronan's Speech.

Why Everyone Is Still Here.

'Ah fuck,' he says, peeling himself from me. 'Really?' He sounds suddenly shy, but Ronan is not shy. 'Do I have to?'

'Yes!' Joanie protests, then lowers her voice. 'You didn't hear this from me, but Theo brought party poppers – bless him – so be prepared for some bangs.'

He shakes his head, objecting, but it's a lie. He wants to give his speech. I know he does, because I have overheard him rehearsing it in the cellar whilst pretending to use the Peloton.

He exhales. 'Fine.'

Since his recent promotion to one of the commissioning editors for the UK arm of Netflix, everyone wants to hear his genius. *He's only thirty-eight. Thirty-eight! Can you believe it?* Even Joanie has more to say to him than she does to me now. There was a time when she called him a walking red flag, but recently she no longer sees the red, just the faded brown of his corduroyed brilliance. (He loves those cords. They cost him so much money but look like he found them in the bin of an old peoples' home. And yet, that's the point.)

He steps out of the bathroom behind Joanie, straightening his shirt.

'I'll be right out,' I say, but as he playfully closes the door on me – making Joanie erupt with her vibrant laugh that I've always loved – I shut my eyes. I wait for them both to fade away, down the hallway towards the kitchen, where the twenty other guests wait to be inspired.

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My hands are shaking.

They still do it, all these years later. A tremor, starting from the inside.

This is my life.

Listening to the cheer explode from our guests as Ronan takes his place centre stage by the Smeg fridge (double door!), I look back to the stack of books on the shelf next to the candle and the peace lily. One about Freud, one by Jung, one about dysfunctional attachment styles in adults, a Sylvia Plath poetry collection and a book with a red cover. My book.

I pull it out. The feel of its spine against my fingertips sends a shudder down mine.

The Sunday Times Bestseller

SHALLOW EMBERS

Beneath a simple graphic of a red flame is the author's name.

Mallory Maddox

It's hard to see my name in print now. Not as fun as you might think. Every time I see it, I find myself having to fight a very strong and visceral impulse to throw the book from the window, flush it away or – a more recent one – spit on it. I avert my eyes from the gold lettering, moving them to the puff quote just to the left of the flame.

'A painfully raw yet beautiful debut – a coming-of-age story to be read by everyone. Maddox has it all'

P.K. ANDERSON

I didn't know who the hell P.K. Anderson was back when I wrote the thing, but by God did I find out. I followed her on Twitter, DM'd gushing thanks, asked her to lunch, invited her to my book launch. Some might say I was obsessive, but I think that

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would be a tad dramatic. It was strategic. My publisher told me that I needed to surround myself with other up-and-coming authors, so I tried to take their advice. We wrote in different genres. Me: intense realism. P.K.: high fantasy. Paula Kate's debut came out the year before mine. Both our stories had a coming-of-age element to them that seemed to appeal to the same readership, Young Adults. Hers was a trilogy about a bisexual teenage boy who develops the telepathic power of foresight that got a six-figure pre-empt and sold in over forty territories. Mine got a ten-grand offer for world rights, but ended up doing well, thanks to some YouTuber called CreIsYourBae picking it for her book club (she loved the cover), and then it 'exploded' on Twitter. I sold twelve thousand copies in one day.

I was twenty-nine.

Seven years ago.

That was seven years ago. And we never did meet, but I guess P.K. was busy.

Since then, she has left her husband, acquired over one million TikTok followers and a huge film deal from Lionsgate (another six figures for the option alone), and is still writing the series to this day: prequels, sequels, spin-offs, the lot – now from her beachfront house in Malibu. She is an inspiration to so many, according to Cosmopolitan magazine. I can't remember the whole article (I got lost in its sea of hyperbole that made my brain want to implode), but in short it described her as '*fierce, independent*' and, '*not that it matters, strikingly beautiful*'.

Seven years ago.

And for me, since then: nothing.

Well, not nothing. My agent dropped me and my publisher pulled my second book. The TV adaptation fell out of contract. I came off Twitter for 'creative reasons': I got sick of blocking accounts that relentlessly asked me *What's the hold up? Why won't you write another? Maybe you can't LOL* because I myself have been blocked.

Writer's Block.

At first, when I would hear that term, I didn't fully believe in it. It sounded like bullshit to me. But as time went on, and I couldn't

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think of a new idea, I realised that it could become incredibly useful. I used it to leverage an external narrative of creative brilliance: I was so spent emotionally from writing *Shallow Embers* that I needed to give myself a break. To be nominated for the Waterstones Best Debut Fiction Award at twenty-nine takes a lot out of you – and I was the proof.

It worked. For a while. The pain I professed to have gone through was lapped up in the corners of the internet that cared. *The struggle of being this brilliant.*

But the truth is, I had no more.

No more ideas. No more space. Blocked.

Blocked by my stint in hospital. Blocked by what that meant for me, coming so out of the blue. Blocked by the period of recovery time after it. Blocked by the online counselling course I later enrolled in to pretend I was interested in the psychology of other people *for my books*. (Not because Ronan told me to do something useful and I thought I was going to lose my mind being in the house all day running out of money.) Blocked by the clients I now have (three) who I see on a weekly basis, each telling me versions of the same story. Blocked by feeling small next to my husband and his continued success, his rise, throughout the past seven years, to greatness. All of this underscored by a shadowy, persisting darkness, only punctuated by such intense intrusive thoughts that I have wondered if I'm even real. Blocked by his continued asking to have a child.

Maddox has it all.

I look to the other side of the flame, at the second quote.

'A modern-day Virginia Woolf'
THE OBSERVER

More cheers from the other room.

More of Ronan's muffled voice. 'Thank you all for coming!'

I hate this. This life. The people in my kitchen. The disappointment I can feel from each of them. The constant glances of, *Was it a fluke?* I hate the way I write. Or should I say, the way I don't write. I hate the way I speak. The way I look. Floating

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around with my hair in a messy bun, not because I'm messy, but because I care. It takes twenty minutes for me to make it look like that. I hate how I have become meek.

Ronan says it occasionally. *You've become meek, Mallory.*

Meek Mal.

I can hear him now, his slurred, rehearsed speech beginning. 'I didn't prepare anything. But I'll say a few words…'

The guests laughing. In love with him.

I slide the book – my book – back into its place, hidden between the others.

'It is a pleasure to celebrate this with you. I can't believe it, really…'

'We can!'

'I have been told Theo brought party poppers. Try not to aim for my head – however much you might want to – or you'll have shit TV for the rest of your lives.'

Laughter.

The jealousy spikes and spurs me to grab the tumbler of whiskey he left on the sink, neck it in one, then pick up my phone. Before I can stop myself I am typing into Google.

How to write a bestseller again.

I stop, considering. *Don't be stupid, Mallory.*

I delete the word *again*, and hit enter.

A few professional-looking websites. Some advertisements for writing courses. How To Write a Bestseller: 6 Easy Steps. I keep scrolling down until I see a Reddit blog.

The truth lies in Reddit.

I open it.

Hello! You're probably here because you know you have the potential to write but you are stuck, sick of your current job and/or you want money.

See. Reddit knows. It always knows.

Well, fear not. Here is how to write the next big literary hit!!!!

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Trends to follow:

- *Underrepresented voices are very popular currently. So if you've had a shit life, you = winning!!!!!*
- *Crime is good but make it cosy. People want to read about murder next to their fire places drinking red wine.*
- *Fantasy is huge – throw a dragon or two in there BUT make it sexy. Better still, make the dragons sexy. It doesn't even need to be well-written. Just make your lead character a bit weirdly into their fantasy pet that they ride (lol).*
- *Make people cry. People looooovveee to cry.*
- *Dark is good.*
- *Also – always remember: gay is in. Go gay. It's cool now. It sells. However – here is the gold dust – the perfect blend is gay AND sad. You nail that, you're minted. And probs an award winner.*

Thank me later xxx mwah. Happy writing, bitches

The post has been liked over nine thousand times.

I think of Paula Kate and her bisexual boy, responsible for the Malibu house purchase. And for her divorce. I suddenly think of all the other books that are being screamed about from every corner of the internet. Lots of gay going on. Sorry, lots of *LGBTQI+*. I love so many of those books, and I've actually read, not just googled, them. *A Little Life.* Oh my God, I bawled and bawled, and it was *so long.* Come to think of it, some of my favourite films, too. *A Single Man* – so sad, and so *chic. God's Own Country.* So raw and so *real. Milk.* Sean Penn was breathtaking – he won all the awards. *Philadelphia*, too. One of the greats. Tom Hanks lost so much weight for the role, he was remarkable. *The Hours.* I *loved* that film. The scene where Ed Harris was so riddled with shame and HIV that he threw himself from the window. It made me cry.

Make people cry.

I'm not gay though.