

SOME EVENTS SHIFT THE WORLD ON ITS AXIS, AND THINGS ARE NEVER THE SAME AGAIN.
A BIRTH. A DEATH. A DIAGNOSIS.

A NOVEL



SILVIA
SBARAINI

GINA'S THERAPY

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'Apart from getting hit, it was great.'

– Lee Meager, former boxing champion

PROLOGUE

Some events shift the world on its axis and things are never the same again. A birth. A death. A diagnosis.

Looking back, life inevitably divides into 'Before' and 'After', like some clichéd diet advert. As I pinpoint the day my world began to shift, I wonder if I knew, subconsciously, that something significant was afoot. Like an animal sensing a storm brewing. But it's easy to reinterpret with hindsight, and just as easy to get it wrong. So, to tell my story, I shall resuscitate the past, breathe it back into the present, live it as if for the first time.

It's the end of April 2004. A normal Thursday, during a normal week, full of the normal people, tasks and routines of life before. Well, normal for me.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCKIN' ON MY FRONT DOOR

'This one's going well,' says Moya.

'Do I have eyes this time?'

'No. And only one leg.'

Great. When Moya introduced herself at a party, saying she was an artist and would like to paint me, I'd envisaged portraits of vibrant beauty. She told me I looked like 'a post-iconic Debbie Harry'. Despite realising that 'post-iconic' meant 'gone to seed', I was flattered. In your forties, compliments are not as forthcoming as they used to be. I reasoned that, if I agreed to pose, I'd be entitled to refer to myself as 'a model'. And even if Moya had a Lucian Freud style – brutal in its fleshy honesty – at least I'd be immortalised. But it turns out Moya's work is unflatteringly abstract, which explains why I never appear with a full set of limbs or facial features. And why she rarely sells anything. You have to give the well-to-do, buying public what they want, and what they want are pleasant-looking young women, not middle-aged catastrophes.

I used to be married to an artist. It was wonderful, if you happened to like having an installation of gas masks and Victorian nighties swinging from wire coat hangers in a corner of your living room. But if you needed a bill paid or food on the

table, it was rubbish. As if thinking of the devil has summoned him, I hear Olly's distinctive tap-tap-tapping on my front door. Olly has devoted himself to remaining permanently stoned for the twenty-six years I have known him. His arrival is, as always, accompanied by a creeping, soporific brain mist, which causes all rationality to desert me. This effect must have something to do with his dazzling good looks, which, infuriatingly, have not diminished with time.

He taps again. I sigh, then get up from the table in the dining room, where I have been typing on the laptop while Moya paints me. Quite often during these combined working sessions I'll forget she's here. Although I don't have to sit still for Moya, I am mindful of what objects are about me, for she will include them in the composition. The memory of seeing myself with a two-litre bottle of cola incorporated into my torso still disturbs me.

I open the door to Olly, and am consumed by his smiley emerald eyes, black dancing lashes, and lips, lips, lips that make me quake. Every time I see Olly I fall in love. Every time I fight this off. I have trained myself to remember what a useless git he is. So I now recall: the bailiffs arriving, even though he'd *promised* he'd paid the bills; leaving him to babysit Skylark and coming home from work to find her playing in the gutter and him stoned, asleep in the back garden; Olly claiming he slept with one of my friends because he 'mistook' her for me. If I allow myself to remember any more, I fear tipping myself over the edge, so I usually restrict it to three, but there is a range of hundreds, probably thousands, from which to choose.

I sigh again. Sighing replaces pouting when you get to my age.

'It's me,' says Olly dumbly, but with a magnificent, sunbeam smile.

He makes for the front room. He has come to watch my Freeview TV as he only has an analogue, and because his girlfriend presents a bargain programme on the Happy Holidays Channel and he likes to roll spliffs and talk to her from the sofa.

'Tea?' he enquires hopefully.

I wonder when the 'Olly effect' will wear off. He is forty-four now, but it still shows little sign of waning. Perhaps it's our shared history. We met when I was twenty-two and he was eighteen. We have spent our adult lives loving and hating each other, often simultaneously. Well, I have. Olly just smiles glibly, whether you're telling him you'd die for him or want to bash his skull in. He's always taken the path of least resistance, but it seems to have paid off. And he does have artistic talent, sort of. He was ahead of his time in the late seventies, as was pointed out in a review only last weekend.

There was an unsurprising lack of appreciation for his early artistic endeavours: installations consisting of disorientating, joining rooms constructed from plasterboard, onto which random cartoon images were projected along with strobe lighting. Fortunately, Olly went on to discover the more peaceful, and successful, craft of sculpting. Now he spends his days carving smooth egg shapes out of stone. His sculptures are beautiful: fine grained, but with the tiniest flaws which 'make' them, their sheer surfaces offering themselves up to be touched. Critics have called them sublime and transcendental, the perfection of their form sacred and moving. And those qualities are discernible, to the spiritually inclined. But I have come to see them as a reflection of Olly: a lovely surface with nothing underneath.

I'm being unfair, probably. Trying to reduce my painkiller consumption, having got rather attached to them after a recent

operation, is no doubt making me extra crotchety. It was only day surgery, keyhole, but the healing has been slow. Moya took a message for me earlier, from the hospital. They asked me to ring back as soon as possible. I did, but it went straight to their answering machine. Now I'm waiting for them to call me back. The surgery was to remove a large cyst, but the doctor had to take the ovary as well, because it had become so twisted. That was weeks ago, but the follow-up appointment still hasn't come through, which must be why they're phoning.

Olly, yes, he earns a good living, or has done in the last ten years or so, the decade in which we finally divorced, so I haven't felt the benefit of it. He has an undeserved lucky streak, too. Like the time his sculpture sank the ship that was transporting it to Italy. It had been commissioned for a small fortune by a luxury car manufacturer, but insured for five times as much, so Olly's now waiting for the huge payout.

But I'm worried about what he'll do with the money. When he was seventeen, a doting, childless great-aunt left her small estate to him. Olly decided to go travelling, India being the final destination. But he only got as far as Dover, where he spent six months gobbling up drugs, returning penniless, just in time to meet me.

I think all this as I make his tea and, despite myself, I do it carefully. I use a pot, as he prefers, and sweeten it with a spoonful of golden sugar that clusters together as if slightly moist.

'Just going to add a nip of whiskey,' says Moya, as I hand her a large black coffee and she goes to retrieve her hip flask from her jacket pocket.

Moya's not much of a one for conversation. She speaks in sharp barks – the truth, as she sees it. Needless to say, most

people find her difficult company. She's a lesbian of the old school: rides a Norton motorcycle, wears men's suits, smokes cigars, all that. She has a noble face, always tanned. She lives on the coast, a ten-minute drive away from my house, with her partner, and spends a lot of time, when not dismembering her fellow humans on canvas, bobbing about in boats. Her idea of nirvana is to live in Cornwall, for the light and the fishing, but her partner doesn't want to leave Kent. Moya was a member of the local lifeboat team for twenty-five years. As I pass her on my way to the front room, I think: there is a woman who has saved lives. But it doesn't stop me wanting to wax off her moustache.

Olly is smoking a spliff when I bring in his tea. His girlfriend, Simone, is in full flow for *Spain on a Shoestring*. Simone wants to be a serious, specifically Shakespearian, actress and has been auditioning unsuccessfully for the RSC for years. She enacts her holiday-selling persona with subtle irony.

'Simone. Nice top. Nice colour,' says Olly, talking to the TV. 'Used to have a jacket that colour. Or was it a car? Can you remember, Gina?'

Olly now goes off into a 'thinking' stupor while dropping ash on my sofa. He's a bit like a grown-up child who should have left home years ago. What's he still doing here – on my furnishings, in my life, drinking my tea?

The sound of Donna, my cleaner, clattering down the stairs with the Hoover interrupts my thoughts. Even a shapeless, gingham housecoat with *Domestic Darlings* emblazoned across the chest can't detract from Donna's long fair hair and curvaceous charms, although the look she goes for is more girl gang leader than beauty queen.

'I see shithead's here again,' Donna observes, as she glances into the front room on her way to the kitchen. Olly nods back happily.

'And the lesbo,' Donna mutters, eyeing Moya, who is sneakily glugging another little snifter straight from hip flask to mouth, bypassing dilution in coffee. 'Artists? Piss artists more like. How am I supposed to do me job with them cluttering up the place?'

'Can I get you a cup of anything, Donna?' I ask.

'Nah, not when I'm in the middle of work. And I've got to unblock this poxy Hoover again. I'm charging for the extra time, mind.'

As Donna begins to dismantle the Hoover on the kitchen floor, I return to my laptop on the dining-room table.

For the last few years I have been writing for *Eurotica*, a bi-monthly magazine. Stories have to be both European and erotic in nature, and I need to submit an outline to the editor today. So far, I have opened a new document and typed 'story outline' at the top. This one is to be about love and sex in middle age and out of doors, 'al-fresco adventures' being the theme of the next issue. I am middle-aged; I go outside; I have an imagination: it must be possible.

Half an hour later, I am still circling the empty, whitewashed room that is my mind, when the phone rings. I rush to answer, thinking it's the hospital, but it turns out to be Richard, my editor.

'Gina, darling, how's it progressing?'

'Um. Slowly. Could you give me a better hook?'

'Older protagonists,' Richard enthuses, 'wise, experienced, second chance at love, passions reawakened, better than it's ever been. Think holiday romance, sultry heat, out in the full

force of bursting nature, that type of thing. And Golden Years Health Products are running a full-page advertisement for their vitamins, so try to get in something about dietary supplements being sexy.'

'Hmm.'

'Oh, don't be so precious! The bulk of our readers are in the forty-plus age range. Just imagine the characters are in their twenties, then give the men streaks of steely grey in their still impressively full heads of hair and the women saggy tits. No! Not saggy. *Never* saggy. Give them ... let me think ... breasts weighted by the depth and breadth of experience.'

'I'll try.'

'And don't forget the cod liver oil or vitamin E,' Richard concludes, before his customary, 'Bye-ee.'

I hang up and stare into space.

'What about a lesbian story?' suggests Moya.

I gingerly ask Moya if she has any ideas for plot lines, preferably with an outdoorsy, nature theme.

'Fell in love with a fish porter from Billingsgate once,' she replies, not quite so helpfully.

I type up a story outline involving a female painter (Moya minus a couple of decades, donkey jacket and smell of motorcycle oil, and with the addition of untameable corkscrew curls, brooding eyes and beautiful hands) who has an erotic encounter with a mermaid (Donna with tail and capacity to speak without swearing) while out on the water (exchange Whitstable for Lake Como) metaphorically fishing for inspiration. With the deadline fast approaching and feeling totally uninspired, I am reduced to borrowing and mangling a song title from Tim Buckley and call the story *Siren Song*. I email the outline to Richard, stating that

it is 'an experimental work exploring the fantasy and fairy-tale genres but with a modern twist'.

'Front door again,' says Moya, though I haven't heard a thing. 'It's like Bedlam today.'

I listen hard, and can just make out a nervy, unfamiliar tap-tapping. I leave my laptop once more, to open the door to a skinny, shivering woman with her head bowed. She is wearing sunglasses, though the sky is uniformly grey.

'Is this the right house?' she mumbles.

She must want Leon, my ex-psychotherapist and, more recently, neighbour.

'Are you looking for Dr Comiskey?' I ask.

She nods and, as she raises her head, removes the sunglasses. Immense suffering is contained within the very flesh and sinew of her features, as if a knitting needle has been thrust into her heart and is now being withdrawn very, very slowly. Potential collapse twitches around the edge of her grimace; one small move and the whole lot is going to give way.

'Next door,' I say, gently, and she moves away; I make a mental note to remind Leon to put up a brass plaque.

'Hello,' calls a voice, 'is this number nineteen?'

I look over to see a man standing on the pavement.

'Yes?' I call back. I then notice that he's squinting at my roof. 'Oh, you must be the building surveyor.'

'That's right,' he says, as he begins to walk up the front path, before stopping short, apparently shocked by me. 'You look like -'

'I know, passing resemblance to Debbie Harry - past her best, older sister maybe, the fat years, like Elvis.'

'No, no. My mother.'

'Oh.'

Why do people keep disrupting my day? Surely this amount of distraction isn't normal, even for me? Or maybe it is, but I'm more uptight than usual – anxious about the hospital. When I was being discharged after the op and they couldn't make a follow-up appointment because the computers were down, they said they'd be in touch. When I didn't hear from them, I assumed everything was fine. Now this phone call has got me worried. But all I can do is wait for them to get back to me. I try not to get annoyed with Mr Building Surveyor. He's just making conversation and is here to do the job I asked him to, which is give the place a once-over before I employ a builder to do a total refurbishment.

'Really, I look like your mother?' I say, feigning interest, after clocking that he looks rather energetic and fit for a man in his middle years, forty-five I'd guess, and that his hair is still more black than grey.

'Yes. She was a wonderful woman. Very striking. She posed for many artists.'

Artists. Again. I am hexed. Some are cursed by boils, migraines, insanity. I am a woman cursed by artists.

'I pose too,' I say. 'It's not all it's cracked up to be. Anyway, you'd better come in. It doesn't look like I'm going to get much work done today.'

Once inside, I explain the history of the house to him: how it used to be divided into three flats, and how, over the years, I rented, then bought, the ground and first-floor ones, converting them back into a single dwelling. Then, last year, when the small attic flat – reached via a metal fire escape in the back garden – came up for sale, I was determined to buy it. So, I made the

big decision to sell a house I'd inherited years ago and had been renting out, and bought it, along with the freehold of the building. Now I'm planning the final reunion of the whole place. I should have enough to pay for the renovations with, hopefully, a little to spare.

19 River Street has the layout of a typical Victorian house: a lounge at the front, a dining room with French doors to the garden, which opens into a long, galley kitchen, and two bedrooms and a big bathroom (that used to be a bedroom) upstairs. I think I'm going to turn the attic flat into one large room with an en suite. I recently finished a short-term admin contract at the college and haven't applied for anything else so that I can supervise the refurb. I have earned *some* money over the years from my writing efforts, but have always had to work – mainly office jobs – at least part-time, as well. This will be the first time I haven't had a 'sensible job', as my mum used to say, for donkey's years. Still, if I run low on cash, I can always do some temping.

I show the building surveyor where the staircase needs to be reinstated from the first to the second floor. Then we go outside, so that he can hold mysterious devices against bricks and poke holes in the window frames.

'What's your professional verdict then?' I ask, as we stand in the back garden. 'Any major problems?'

'No structural ones. Just the usual maintenance and refurbishment I'd expect for a large Victorian semi. You say you used to rent that attic flat?'

'Yes. I moved in with my daughter when she was little. I always dreamed of buying the whole place and converting it back into one big house. Silly really.'

'Not at all. I'm sure it'll be worth it when it's finished. Should be very straightforward to put the staircase back in. And get rid of this,' he says, tapping the old fire escape. 'You sure you don't want to keep it?'

'No. It's a death-trap.'

'It could do with some minor repairs and a coat of paint, but I'd hardly call it that.'

'No, it is. There was a terrible accident and ... well, someone died, falling from the top.'

'Really? When was that?'

'Fifteen years ago.'

'But how? It's structurally sound.'

I shrug and look at the grass.

'I don't know,' I answer softly.

'How ghastly. Get rid of it then. I'll drop my report in next week.'

After I've said cheerio to the surveyor and made my way back to the laptop – through the fog of Moya's cigar smoke, and after checking there haven't been any phone calls while I've been outside – I find an email from Richard. He requests that I submit a story outline more in keeping with *Eurotica's* readership, stating that the fantasy and fairy-tale genres are not. He advises something a little more 'real and gripping', and ends 'not up to your usual standard', although he approves of the lesbian theme.

I don't know why he's being so uppity. I email back another outline about a camp, gardening magazine editor called Raymond, whose only pleasure in life is to visit Soho to be wrapped in cling film and flagellated by a stranger (that'll teach him to get drunk at the Christmas party and reveal his secrets to me).

Richard emails ten minutes later to say he's had a change of heart about the painter and the mermaid, his single request being that I re-title the story *Sea Spray*. The only decent thing about it was the nicked title, but never mind because – ha – I win.

I glance up to see Moya smiling bleakly at me.

'Smoking break,' she states, as she ignites another cheroot. I decide to join her.

As I draw the flame of the lighter to the tip of the forbidden cigarette and inhale the first satisfying lungful (I know, I know, I should give up), there is a pounding on the front door. My heart leaps shockingly. Such an unignorable knock can mean only one thing. A thirty-year reign of resentment is behind that banging, a force that provokes a futile desire to scramble for cover. What began as a hopeful fluttering, an unfurling promise of joy, somehow transformed into this. She's pounding again, harder, with more hatred. I must answer, as delay will only make her angrier. I have no choice but to face my personal persecutor once again.

'Mother,' she accuses, as I open the door.

'Yes,' I admit, while hopelessly scanning my mind for a good enough excuse not to let her in.

She barges past, eyeing my cigarette – which I fail to hide adequately behind my back – with pleasurable disapproval. I follow her down the hallway. This is what she sees: Olly glazed, staring at the television and talking to himself while smoking a vast (even I'm surprised by the size) spliff; Moya singing a (alcohol-induced) sea shanty while attacking the canvas with a painting knife; Donna swearing profusely at a particularly offensive bit of dirt while scrubbing the kitchen floor. My daughter then stands for a moment and reads my *Eurotica* story,

glaring from the computer screen, before fake-gasping 'Pure pornography!' The final straw appears to be when a voice (no doubt Knitting Needle Woman from earlier) screams from next door, 'No, no, no, I can't take any more!'

In less than five minutes Skylark has gone. Sorry, my daughter's name is now Susan. I named her Skylark in 1971 and she renamed herself as soon as she was eighteen. Susan makes it clear with every look, every comment, every roll of an eye, that I always was, am and will be, an unfit, despicable excuse for a mother and that she will never, ever forgive me. Sometimes I wish that I, too, had the option of inflicting such demanding reproachfulness on my own mother, but she is dead, though not exactly gone.

True, I did have Susan when I was sixteen. But at least I kept her and struggled on alone. True, I did then meet and marry Olly who, though not badly intentioned, was an utterly useless stepfather. True, I may have earned us a living precariously, but earn it I always did. Unlike me, Susan studied hard, did well at school, took a sensible job, saved herself for the right man – an organised and efficient accountant called Graham – and had one child, meticulously planned, at the age of twenty-six. Note: one child only, because motherhood is not turning out to be as perfect as Susan expected it to be. I have heard it said that grandchildren are the grandparents' revenge and this has proved to be the case most wonderfully for me. For no child ever presented herself with such an old-fashioned and pleasing flurry of fair, flouncy curls, angelic features and skip-along gait, as my granddaughter Christine – Chrissy for short. And no child's personality was ever so at odds with her appearance. She is a difficult, stubborn and obsessive girl, and she gets on marvellously with me.

Before Susan marched back out through the front door with a 'Mother, will you and this godforsaken house never change?', she requested that I pick Chrissy up from school tomorrow and bring her back here for tea. Although Susan works flexitime and knocks off early on Friday, she prefers not to collect Chrissy. For she needs a break from her daughter as much as I did from her when she was a child. When I consider the female line of my family, I feel the generations have become muddled somehow, the mothers and daughters the wrong way round. Chrissy should have been my daughter and Susan my mother's.

I'd rather leave my mother out of this, but know she will come back to haunt, literally, as mothers have a tendency to do. Sometimes I feel trapped between them – my mother and my daughter – the unhappy filling in a prissy, resentful sandwich, from which I wish I could quietly escape.

I retreat into a plan to get everyone out of my house as quickly as possible, so that I can then enjoy a double dose of brain-addling, sleep-inducing, opium-based painkillers. Some habits from the seventies die hard, though it's all on prescription these days.

Gina has enough to deal with: a disapproving daughter, her ex-psychotherapist living next door, home renovations and a hopeless ex-husband she still loves.

Catapulted into the unknown territory of surgery, chemo and support groups, Gina faces her predicament with strength, wit and a faithful pair of elasticated-waist trousers. As treatment progresses, she finds herself asking surprising questions: will she ever be able to concentrate on what her oncologist is saying without being distracted by his enormous moustache? Should her best friend's thirty-year love of David Essex prevent her advice from being taken seriously? And how will she explain her illness to her seven-year-old granddaughter?

Blessed with the ability to delight in life's absurdities and contradictions, *Gina's Therapy* is a warm-hearted exploration of the things that matter most in life.



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