



This Thing Is Not Yet Over

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Philip would get caught. Louise, who watched a lot of police procedurals and so would know how to leave no trace, may get away with it. In fact, when Louise found out about Philip and Julie, when she was almost comic with rage, she said she wanted to kill them both, but she knew the police would trace it back to her with her obvious motive and as she couldn't do the time, she would have to commit suicide. Her exact words were: "I want to kill you and kill her but then I'd have to kill myself and I've got tickets for Nick Cave in September. So, you're really not worth it." That hurt him a bit. Anyway, Philip has never really taken to the police show, and thus is more ignorant about how to commit a crime with the least chance of getting caught.

So, as much as he would like to, he can't. His father is lying here, in what his sister, Elaine, has termed The Dying Room, because anyone who is put here never comes out alive; she has observed this in all the time she spent by his bed when he was in the main ward, her eyes following whoever was wheeled in and out of the room where he has now taken them hostage. And Philip is alone with him and it would be pretty easy, he thinks, to squeeze the tube delivering oxygen to him, or flick a switch, but he would obviously be caught and he really isn't worth going to prison for. Philip wonders if it would hurt him if he knew that.

The room is off the side of the ward, and has its own TV. Elaine has bought a new remote control for it, so when their father is awake he can stare at whatever the hell he wants to stare at, anything that distracts him from spending his last days thinking about what he's done. There's a little bathroom, en-suite, although he uses one of those bags instead. He has no control over that now. Whenever Philip wants to go he feels very much like doing it on his father, on his sleeping body, and the wires and the sticking plasters and the bedclothes covering him. But he doesn't. After all, it would just be someone like his mum getting paid a pitiful amount to clean it up. But he *could* do it, because his father can't control him now, either.

Instead Philip just looks at him, thinking about why he's here, and of course he's here for his mum, and before she gets back from the canteen it could be over – for her as well as him – if Philip had the guts to put his finger on the tube. And his mum is here for Elaine, who never felt the brunt of his alcoholic anger. That's what comes of the age gap and being a girl. 'One day,' Philip says out loud to the body before him, 'I might show her the scars. It would explain why I never wear a T-shirt in the summer.'

He hits the button on the remote control and the TV flickers into life. It's a crime show, mostly set in a hospital, and everyone speaks with American accents. Maybe he should keep watching, he thinks; he might get some tips. He turns over to a quiz show and then to something about people getting rid of the stuff that's been clogging up their attic. Philip is losing the will to live, and then he turns and looks at his sick father and the thought that he hasn't got long left lifts his spirits.

This makes him sound cold, positively arctic. He turns the TV off from the set, and settles back down into the armchair by the bed. The crime show lingers, and thoughts of Louise intermingle. The first day he saw her. The way she had that Jean Seberg hair that was growing out into an early 1970s Keith Richards flick; her dark eyes – at the time he didn't know just how dark. The day he asked her to see that film, in front of the whole class, as though that would somehow make it less like a real date, make him less fearful of being turned down; the way his heart shivered when she appeared in the cinema foyer; the way she was glowing; her eyes delving into him; the first time he took her hand and led her into her bedroom; the first kiss, which he visited upon her before her head had even hit the pillow; her nakedness, and the thought of touching her, which always made him breathless. And then Julie intrudes. She can't be here, because even after all this time no one knows about them. She's not for general consumption: her advancing years and her face don't reflect Philip well, so she's another of his secrets. But with Louise, it was different. And it wasn't just about how they looked together. She showed him something he hadn't seen before, something he didn't realise he wanted until she offered it. She released him. For all the good it did her.

It would have been starting nursery school now.

Philip looks down at his hands, and then up at the oxygen tube that is helping to keep alive this man who is called his father. He prefers looking at his hands. They could do some damage here, now, in this side room off the main ward. He turns them over and notices that he has the beginnings of a callus. At once there's something like a tear in his eye but it quickly gets blinked away. Callus. Callous. The irony doesn't need to be pointed out to him: how Louise, once she had worked him out and started to hate him, had told him that it had always bugged her how he couldn't say 'callus' – it would come out as 'calloose' – but she would never correct him while she loved him. He has his father to thank, for crushing him, teaching him how to be callous. Calloose.

Well, it was kind of callous. Leaving Louise to have it – what? Scraped out? Sucked out? For all his Internet research he hadn't been able to read exactly how they did it, just that it seemed to be easier these days. He had read something about a tablet that would bleed it out of her and a part of him had hoped she would opt for that, so she could stay in her own bed and he wouldn't have to take her home afterwards. As it is he didn't go with her anyway. She didn't want him to. She said so.

Philip's father is stirring a bit, and Philip catches himself hoping that it's his death throes. Really, it would not bother him, it would not bother him one bit for him to die now, with Philip looking between his hands and his father's face. It's a face that looks like Philip's, and of course that's why his mum went for him all those years ago, but it isn't why she stayed for so long. They put that down to the meds and the fear, until Philip found it somewhere in him to get both of their lives on track. In the months between Christmas and spring he had her in a safe place and himself in college. Smart move that turned out to be.

He glances around the room. Considering it's a hospital, the walls are less bare than his own flat, the one he bought with Sadie before that went off, and crushed him again and added to the chill in his blood. They appear to have made the most of Photoshop: there are signs with different patterns and colours, for hospice care and support groups and visiting hours. There's a little buzzer by the bed in case of emergencies. Philip wonders if it's battery-operated and if so whether he should take them out, or at least put them in the wrong way round. The thought of his father's pathetic bony fingers pressing down to no avail, no noise coming, no nurse coming, doesn't make Philip smile as he thought it would. There's a notice board with some

cards pinned to it: one from Elaine, one from mum, one from his brother in Canada. This man's life and it amounts to three cards. Briefly, Philip wonders how many cards he would have. He wonders if Louise would send one, if she'd visit him, and he thinks she would. He had to paint her in black to get past what he did, but really she's pretty nice; really nice. He thinks she would come.

He is bored of sitting here. He thinks about calling. Calling Louise. She was always interested in his family, her surfeit of empathy compensating for his lack, gushing over him in a way that he wanted to find annoying so that he could move away from her, but that really he found beautiful and sweet. She didn't really show that side of herself to people until she let them in, and she let him in. Yep, for all the good it did her. He wonders what she would say if he called her. He knows that if he told her he was here, in the hospital, sitting by the bed of his dying father, she would say three things: "Are you ok?"; "How's your mum?"; and "Don't try to kill him: they'll work out it was you really quickly." The thought of this makes him smile for the first time in ages. He should call her. But he doesn't. He is trying to be kind, and after what he left her with it's probably kinder that he doesn't call. But he doesn't really think she'd mind hearing from him.

He's saved from having to make a decision, because Elaine creeps in. It's funny, their father never treated her like he treated Philip, and yet somewhere along the line she has learned to creep around him, even while he is lying here incapable of doing anything, not even able to move his arm to brush his son away when he stands over him. Elaine kisses her brother on the cheek and squeezes his hand, and it's like something an older, wiser person would do. Philip looks up at her, and suddenly he sees Louise's face, dark eyes shining with warmth, not hatred, and he jumps a little. And then he smiles. He can't help it. Elaine smiles back at him, slightly confused. "You look happy. What's *that* about?" She says it in that way she always does, that little vocal tic of hers, inherited from years of watching American comedy shows. "What's *that* about?" Philip keeps smiling and doesn't explain. There's a pause. He asks where their mum is, and Elaine tells him she's on her way, that she's been outside having a cigarette. Seconds pass, in silence, except for their father's occasional guttural breathing, heavy and laboured, like a job; like it's forcing the life out of him. Philip lives in hope.

The door opens again, and it's their mum. She comes straight to Philip, as she nearly always has, and puts her arm around his shoulders. He looks up at her and smiles broadly, and in his eyes the expression is something like love. He looks at his dad, and back at his mum and he feels happy. Something like happiness.