

TOMORROW IN THE BATTLE

by Kieron Barry

Scene 7

Jennifer We have to meet for lunch near his work. That's how important and busy he is. It's a small restaurant on Rugby Street, off Russell Square. I get there first, and sit in the banquette facing out. Half the people in here must be doctors. It's probably the safest restaurant in London to start choking in.

A man approaches me, and I think it's him, but it's not. He's impressive, though, and so confident that it takes me a while to realise he's chatting me up. I say 'I'm waiting for someone,' but he gives me his business card with his four initials embossed in very dark blue – M. R. L. K., and I find I'm beginning to like the small scar that runs across his left cheek.

He leaves, and I'm left alone. I'm reflected everywhere, in the mirrors that line the walls, in the chrome of the lights, the shine of the cutlery, the bowls of the wine glasses and the curve of the bottle.

And I say his name three times: Simon. Simon. Simon. And he appears, and I feel something leap in my womb.

Simon John Lennon's killer said that before the shooting he was waiting outside the Dakota building, and half of him was praying that Lennon would come back so he could shoot him, and the other half of him was praying that Lennon wouldn't come back, because if he did he knew he'd shoot him.

That's what it was like trying not to phone her, that's how it felt trying to walk away from the phone, until it was in my hand, not to call her but to return it to its cradle after I called her. That's how it happened.

Jennifer I had bought him a pair of cufflinks from a small shop in the Burlington Arcade. What was I thinking? I just had this urge to spend money on him. I then took them back about an hour later, but then I changed my mind again and bought them back. So I have them with me, gift-wrapped in my bag, but as soon as he arrives I realise the whole idea's stupid and I don't get them out.

Simon I tell her I don't drink at lunchtime. True, but not the whole story. I don't actually drink at all now.

Jennifer I insist on paying, and as I look for my card he sees the gift-wrapped cufflinks and says, 'What's this? Presents on a first date?' And I realise he's joking, he assumes it's not a present, it can't be, why would it be?, it's not even a date, of course, and so I immediately say it's my little niece's birthday, and he says 'Oh, what have you got her?'

And I say: 'Cufflinks.'

Later that afternoon I throw them into the Thames, but as I do so I manage to convince myself that for some reason he can still see me, this is like an hour after we said goodbye at the restaurant, but I can't shake the idea off, so I make it look as though I'm tripping up, and then I have to follow it through and act like I'm disappointed that they've gone overboard.

Scene 8

Simon We don't know when we'll get a heart that he can take, so I sit him down and try to explain. It's actually easier doing that with children than with adults. They're credulous.

He's ten years old, bright as a button. 'So what's wrong with me again?', as if he were asking what time the party was. I take him through it.

'You remember the blood test? You passed that. Well done, you're through to the next round. The echocardiogram? Bing! You passed that too. Round three: the electrocardiogram. Full marks – on to the next level, Super Mario. Remember the cardiac catheterisation? Yet another pass – nothing can stop this kid now. And finally the heart biopsy – he's done it!

'What this means, my friend, is that you have something very rare called restrictive cardiomyopathy. That means that your heart – a muscle – isn't working properly, and it's not filling with blood in the way that it should because the walls inside the heart are too stiff.

'Things in your body that are meant to work for you actually sometimes work against you.'

'So I'm basically fighting myself,' he says.

'That's right. Now I know what you're asking – what's my prize? Well, the prize is – wait for it – a brand new heart. That's right; we're going to send you to sleep, open you up, pop it in, wake you up, and off you go! How does that sound?'

'Where's it going to come from?' he asks.

'Well, we'll take it from someone who doesn't need it any more.'

'What if it's not the right size?'

'It will be, because we'll take it from someone just like you.'

'Why don't *they* need it?'

'Because... they'll be dead, I'm afraid. Unlucky for them. Lucky for you.'

But the boy doesn't get it. 'Why would a *child* be *dead*?'

Scene 9

Anna I spend quite a bit of time imagining an alternative me, one that set off from the same point at the same time but made different decisions. A me that went to Oxford instead of Cambridge, that has all the same strengths but none of the weaknesses, that appears effortless and makes no mistakes.

The main attribute of this other me – the me that could have been – is that she's married to a colleague of Simon's called Matthew. That's the key difference. And she and Matthew have the most astonishing sex life, making love wildly every day or at least as often as I can come up here to the attic when Simon's not back from work yet, listening out for his key in the lock. I generally try to wear wool on these occasions, just a woollen jumper or something, which is cosy and makes me feel cuddly but which also has a certain scratch to it.

The literal part of me insists that I have to imagine everything through from the beginning, how we met, how Matthew arrived first instead of Simon, and so my eyes locked with *his* instead, and it all spins out from there. Actually, sometimes Simon doesn't arrive at all, we never meet, and in fact sometimes it's his parents who never meet, and he was never born, or they do and he was, but he was killed in the war. Desert Storm, that would have to be, I suppose.

But anyway now it's just Matthew and I, and we live on the Cote d'Azur, from where he commutes in to Monaco every now and then. And there's a delicious irony, in that because of Matthew's international reputation and vast wealth no one would ever guess that once in the bedroom he effectively becomes my slave – he's there to serve me and me alone, and he instinctively knows that, and each time he not only fulfils my whim more completely but anticipates it more swiftly.

My goodness he's a magnificent lover, never tiring nor growing old, and on this occasion Sir Matthew hasn't even had time to undress, so urgent is my desire, he's still in white-tie and tails, with his Order of Merit and Nobel Prize medals banging against his chest. The helicopter can wait, he says. Anna; it's all about you, it's all about you. But just as I'm beginning to climax –

Simon 'What on earth are you *doing* up here?'

Anna (*quickly*) 'Pushing my hands into these old letters as a child does with autumn leaves.'

And instantly, just as I'm almost there, Matthew melts away and is replaced by Simon. I have to be thinking of Simon when I come, that's just something I always have to do, it seems. It has to be Simon with his safe, well-meaning, husbandly smell of soap and faint shit. And I think back to the other me, the imaginary one, the relaxed, successful one. Surely *she* would be able to fantasise competently.

But while it lasts, it's wonderful. And 90% of nothing is, after all, better than nothing.