

## On My Own

*I have never had a lasting relationship. That does not mean I cannot love.*  
 Jeanette Winterson Frankissstein 2019

It was after midnight. So, to be exact, it was now Christmas Day. Imogen was scribbling pages in that solitary moment when everyone else has given in to sleep. As she waited for her cocktail of soporifics to take effect, she mulled over the day. The journey here was fine, okay, tolerable, no hiccups. Time had passed quickly as her mind raced back through the previous week's last minute emails, loose work-ends. She'd hardly turned thirty pages of her book in the four or more hours of travel.

She was neither one way nor the other about Christmas. No, that's not true, the partner of Imogen's inner game reminded her. It matters. It's the conventions that bore me rigid, she wrote, make me feel like I'm halfway to hell. Christmas with your 'spiritual' family, as Portia had put it recently in one of their long phone calls, was something else. You can make it up as you go along, no rules.

She had a compulsion about recording everything. It's a way of talking to myself, creating my own story, I know that, Imogen noted. The other pattern she'd developed, being on her own, was deferring sleep till the small hours. In her own house, she let episodes of *The L Word* or *Six Feet Under* run on, one after another. When staying in someone else's house, she wrote page after page quietly into the night.

Cleo and Ros were comfortable to be around, like her favourite red boots, still going strong, the ones you reach for when you want to be easy. Imogen only saw these friends once or twice a year since she'd moved away, but the relationships ran deep, the groove of a life-time, a blood-line in its way. More comfortable than here in the guest bedroom where the bed was too hard and the pillows not right. She was used to it. She'd slept here with three different lovers over the years and now she was on her own.

And tomorrow I get to meet a woman called Miranda who Cleo's been telling me about. Imogen ended her journal entry with this upbeat thought on the final line of the eighth page of illegible writing.

Christmas Day was fine, okay, uneventful in a good way, mostly. Cleo had planned it meticulously and Imogen worked alongside her in the kitchen, making it happen. Cooking a roast was second nature even though she hadn't eaten meat for twenty-five years. You don't forget, although she forgot the Auntie Bessie Yorkshires. They were about to dish up when Ros piped up noticing their absence.

'Damn it, Imogen. It's spoilt the perfect timing.' Cleo could cut like the sharpest of kitchen knives when things didn't come up to her exacting standards.

Had she taken over, been a nuisance rather than a help? Imogen worried away in her head. Should she be more like Ros, going with the flow, always an easy smile hovering, not afraid to opt out? Cleo managed to make her feel all wrong, clunky. She could learn a thing or two from Ros. But the moment passed. Lunch itself was smooth enough.

Later, the three of them chilled out, watched a couple of old films, a sofa each in the sitting room, no expectations, no disappointments. Against her best intentions, Imogen found herself thinking about such times with Portia. She missed Portia's bright appearance in a room full of their house-guests, often including Cleo and Ros, to take the orders.

'Drinks from the bar?' she'd inquire and come back from the kitchen with a tray loaded with the various beverages, each in its correct glass with ice and a slice.

Imogen's glass had been charged all day, but it was pretty much self service here.

'I'm waiting another hour till I start again,' Cleo announced self-righteously as Ros and Imogen emptied a second bottle of fizz.

Boxing Day came soon enough, and Imogen was up for the planned walk and new acquaintance. She was wanting a stretch, her neck hurting as always. Cleo had worked out a ramble that started with an upward climb to get views of the sea before descending back into the town. Miranda had been invited for midday.

Ros was away to see her sister twenty miles along the motorway but would be back later in the afternoon.

'Is that the door, Cleo?' Imogen called down to the kitchen. 'I can hear knocking at the front of the house.'

'Doorbell must need a new battery again,' Cleo grumbled, as she came up the stairs to open the door to Miranda.

'Hey! Come on in.' Cleo changed her tone to greet her friend and introduce her to Imogen who was hovering in anticipation.

Miranda was unlike the person Imogen had invented in her head when she'd listened to Cleo describing her in a phone conversation. Here she was: tall, striking but not beautiful, self-assured and warm, specs fronting a searching gaze.

Cleo had properly warmed up now that Miranda had joined them and the three set off without further delay. They were joined by half a dozen other women at the agreed starting point. Imogen always felt slightly anxious about walks. It dated back to a time she'd been reassured that she was going on a gentle walk that had turned into a nine-mile uphill hike, way beyond her capacity. For some of her friends, that was indeed the definition of a gentle walk but not for Imogen, even before the accident which damaged her back, causing her chronic pain and good reason to think twice before committing to tough treks.

On this walk, the uphill stint was steep but gave her no discomfort. On the slope to the right of the allotments, which hugged the path they were taking, was a memorial lawn. Imogen looked over and thought of her friend who was buried there. She'd ended her life just after her thirtieth birthday. Like Sylvia Plath, it was her third attempt. It was a considered act.

Rounding the hill, they came in sight of the sea. The women stopped walking to take it in. The winter daylight dazzled on the water way below. It was a good place for a break.

Imogen moved to Miranda's side when they resumed walking. She was eager to know about her move to the area, her house, her history. Imogen took to Miranda right away. She was a tad detached, more serene, less chaotic than she had expected. They were not strangers for long. Imogen soon found a thread through the well-trodden city streets of mutual friends, old connections and events to a time when they'd met fleetingly in the distant past.

It had been a New Year's Eve gathering, in one of those generous town-houses shared by four or five friends, lovers, kids. Imogen had spent the duration of the short daylight hours with Portia, the only incentive to leave the rumpled pillows, at that early stage of their liaison, being the prospect of a party. Portia had seemed to know everyone, whereas Imogen only knew a couple of the women from her writing group. She and Portia stuck together, holding hands.

‘Miranda!’ Portia had made her way with extended arms towards a strong looking woman with dark curly hair, wearing a biker jacket.

As Imogen recalled the scene, Miranda’s face in that encounter so long ago emerged from beneath the lines of experience that now creased her skin.

‘Portia. I haven’t seen Portia for years and years.’ Miranda’s features softened as she too lost herself in reminiscence. ‘Do you still see her?’

‘Yes, but not as much as I’d like to.’ Imogen paused. ‘But hey I’m going to text her right now about this.’

Predictably, Imogen’s mobile beeped within minutes to alert her to an incoming message: *Won! send her my love and get a photo! Px.*

Downhill was a killer on the knees. Cleo had toiled somewhat on the way up but was fine now. Imogen was the reverse. It was the downward gradient that jarred her out-of-alignment bones.

‘So, are you coming in for a bite to eat after the walk?’

‘Sure,’ Miranda smiled. But in the event, she drifted away as everyone dispersed.

‘I thought Ros would have been back by now. It was supposed to be a quick visit. I’ve planned our meal for seven o’clock, she knows that.’ Cleo’s whine started as soon as they arrived back to an empty house.

‘Well, you know she leaves things till the last minute. She’ll be here.’ Imogen knew her words sounded bland but she simply couldn’t muster any other response to Cleo’s drama.

Cleo went into the kitchen and assembled the components of the meal: oven ready fish, broccoli and carrots to cook in the steamer, new potatoes ready to be immersed in boiling water.

‘Where is she?’ Cleo was edging into her clamour again when her mobile rang. Imogen watched as she concentrated her attention on the small dots of sound emanating from the technology in her hand.

‘Shit.’ Cleo ended the call abruptly.

‘What?’

‘She’s got a puncture.’ Cleo’s composure crumpled. ‘She’s at the side of the road changing the tyre. For heaven’s sake.’ Her eyes filled.

‘She didn’t leave when she said she would. I just know it,’ she added brusquely.

‘You speak to her,’ she barked as the mobile vibrated on the glass table-top. ‘Please,’ came the afterthought.

‘Hey Ros – you okay?’ Imogen listened, checking for the emotional signals behind the words.

‘Yeah. It’s fine. Some guy just stopped and helped. I would have been okay anyway, but it’s saved me some time. Dinner cooking there? Got Miranda with you?’

‘No, it’s just us, but hurry back anyway.’

‘I will,’ she promised, totally unphased by the situation.

‘I knew she’d be fine.’ Cleo had recovered herself again. ‘Don’t let her know I was upset,’ she concluded fiercely.

December 27. Miranda on my mind. Imogen glowed inwardly as she scribbled her thoughts and re-lived Miranda’s smile, a smile that mobilised her deep brown eyes.

All those years back, Portia had whispered to Imogen that Miranda was one of the most kissable women in town. That was in the heady days of non-monogamy. The upside of all that,

Imogen reflected, was the way you could indulge in endless flirting, the downside being the agonising pain when you had assumed your relationship was exclusive.

Am I just having a surge of nostalgia, Imogen asked herself. Her answer was both yes and no. It's so good, she wrote, to be around women who appear in the same stories as yourself, and then pop up in new stories where you don't have to re-invent yourself as a character.

It's a sequel waiting to happen.