

Good Girl

by Jessie Williams

She's the kind of girl who smiles at strangers walking down the street, as her ponytail swings from side to side. The kind of girl who likes to please everyone. The kind of girl who worries that people don't like her. Even the postman. I say girl. She's 23. She left home five years ago. She has a degree, can change a light bulb, do her own laundry, even build an entire IKEA wardrobe by herself. Technically she is an adult, but honestly, she still feels like a child; not quite fully-formed, or ready, and yet so ready. Perhaps you could call her a Promising Young Woman, but when does that promise start to weigh you down?

The girl, let's call her Lily because she likes the smell, would love to say she lives in Williamsburg and enjoys kicking the crunchy, orange leaves in Prospect Park during Autumn, or maybe a tiny *appartement* in Saint-Germain-des-Prés where bougainvillea blooms in the Spring. Alas, she lives in a council flat in Tower Hamlets, and currently icy rain is hammering at her window. That's what happens in February. London becomes a palette of greys; if God was an artist even he

could not rid this murky shade from his paintbrush. It's a suffocating colour that makes you want to slash the sky with a knife to let the sunshine through.

Lily works at a bookshop down Brick Lane. It only takes her 40 minutes to get there if she power-walks her way through Stepney Green and Whitechapel, while listening to the latest episode of whichever crime podcast has taken her fancy. She normally arrives by 9.35am breathless and flushed, resulting in a lewd comment from Steve, her Brompton-bicycle-riding, pervy boss. Lily just rolls her eyes good-naturedly, whilst imagining chucking *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* at his balding head. At lunchtime she hides in the storeroom, basking in that new book smell, while reading and sipping coffee from her KeepCup.

Lily is currently rereading *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. She had to look up the word 'cadaver' though and can't get the image of one lying cold and blue on a table overlooked by curious medical students, out of her mind.

01/02/2019: 43rd day of Winter, Harry Styles' 25th birthday, 57 days until the Brexit deadline.

Lily was always pining for something or someone. An escape from the mundane confines of reality; searching for the zing that had somehow dissipated from her life without her realising. She used to be determined. The kind of determined that sees plants grow through cracks in the concrete. Then it felt like she was sat in the back of an Uber and the driver was asking where she wanted to go, but she had forgotten so he was just driving around in circles until she remembered. When had she become

such a passive observer? These should be the best years of her life – her prime! Joan Didion once wrote about the moment she lost the conviction that lights would always turn green for her. Lily was stood at those very same traffic lights.

A smile, politeness, and hard work can only get you so far in this world. She had learnt this very soon after graduating from UCL with a 2:1 in English Literature. Broken-hearted (she had fallen in love with her dissertation supervisor; it cost her her first) and numb with disappointment, she spent the first month wallowing in her overdraft; sat in her childhood bedroom surrounded by her dolls, eating bagels, listening to The Fray, and scrolling absent-mindedly through various job sites. But the noose that is student debt was gradually tightening around her neck and in sheer desperation she applied to everything – expecting a slew of offers. Alas, she only received one invitation to an interview: an admin assistant at a tech startup in Piccadilly.

Her generation – millennials with the world at their fingertips – had been promised that they could be anyone they wanted to be. This caused great confusion for Lily, because, what if you didn't know who you wanted to be? Of course she had prepped for the dreaded 'Where do you see yourself in ten years' time?' That was assuming that planet Earth would still be turning on its axis and inhabited by human beings in 2029, what with the childish men currently toying with their nuclear weapons, and Mother Nature understandably feeling a little under the weather.

On the day of the interview Lily wore her best suit which she spritzed with her mum's Chanel No.5. She

checked her star sign predictions for the week: Pisceans were due for an exciting career development, but then so were most of the others. As she crossed Piccadilly Circus she thought that today would be the first day of the rest of her life. A flicker of hope grew from the pit of her stomach. Finally, she felt like she could be on the cusp of adulthood. The clouds had cleared as she strode purposefully towards the office, and as the traffic lights tuned red she promptly had a panic attack and passed out.

Failure was not something Lily was used to. A high-achiever throughout school, she became accustomed to receiving praise until one day it stopped coming, like a waterfall-turned-trickle-turned-dried-up-hole-of-nothingness. It made her feel empty and forgotten and panicked. Everyone needs validation in life, but Lily was ravenous for it. She feeds off it like a vampire sucks blood. It was one of the reasons why she started a blog. She knew hardly anyone read it, although according to the site statistics she has a handful of followers in Azerbaijan. Her last post was 'Why We Love to Hate Becky Sharp', an analysis of William Thackeray's social climbing protagonist in *Vanity Fair*. It got 10 views – her best yet.

Like everyone else she had dreamt of writing a novel. She had scribbled stories ever since she could form sentences, and not always on paper. Her parents' walls and even their car bonnet had acted as pages for her day-dreams. And now, what better time to write than when she's surrounded by great works of fiction everyday? Tolstoy's name winked at her from in front of the

till. Austen was next to the store cupboard. Waugh, Hemingway, Brontë, Kafka; they all peered at her when she looked up from her afternoon scroll on Instagram. Surely she could absorb some of their talent through sheer osmosis? But when she sat down to write, the blank Word doc stared at her menacingly, white as white. The cursor blinked at her, and the words never came.

Maybe it was because she felt so defined by her ability to work hard, to impress, that she didn't know who she was without it. Slowly her friends faded away, going for coffee with new friends to discuss their Tinder adventures and job promotions. Oh, to be young and in London! It might also be down to her ignoring them on Facebook messenger. She didn't want to have to explain once again that she was yet to find a proper job – one that meant career progression, a good salary, regular holidays, and eventually buying a house and getting a cockapoo. Although she knew this was unattainable – she could barely afford to pay her rent, let alone save to buy.

Lily's only regular social interaction was with the friendly Bangladeshi family next door whose delicious curries she could smell from her room, and her Swedish flatmate who doesn't do or say much apart from bring boys home every night. There's also Mabel, the succulent Lily bought from Columbia Road Flower Market, which she has managed to keep alive for five months. She has beautiful thick, pulpy leaves edged with soft spikes, and sits on Lily's window sill looking out over a dingy square in the centre of the council estate.

It was chilly even for February – a draught was creep-

ing in. Lily was perched on her window seat, cup of chamomile in hand, stroking Mabel's velvety fronds, looking out into the darkness. She had been reading a book but had got distracted trying to think of something witty to post on Twitter. She wasn't good at it; she wasn't good at much these days. A commotion outside startled her. She turned her lamp off to best see what was happening below. There were two teenage boys having an argument – not an unusual occurrence on the streets of east London. 'FUCK OFF!' yelled one of them, his voice high-pitched and desperate. The other boy, with lanky limbs ensconced in a tracksuit, loomed over him. A swearing match ensued. The two boys had a gaggle of friends egging them on from behind. They both can't have been a day over sixteen. There is a kerfuffle, and the word 'cunt' is thrown about. And then a flash of blade comes out of nowhere. The taller boy grabs his side and crumples to the ground, like a Jenga tower destroyed by an eager poke. The other boys leg it, while the victim's friends just stand gawping at the now quickly blooming red wound. She should go down and help him, thought Lily. She knew that would be what any other person would do. But something rooted her to the spot - she couldn't move - and it wasn't fear freezing her. She felt a frisson, like a lightning bolt shooting through her, seeing the fragility of humanity, the fleet-ingness of it all; how life can be so easily taken away. To kill a fellow human being seemed so easy, so simple.

The flashing blue lights swiftly came and cleared everything up. The boy was taken to The Royal London Hospital, where most stab victims get taken – one of the best trauma centres in the city. The next morning

Dawn Watson was told her son wouldn't be coming home.

That day, Lily had a spring in her step as she walked to work, passing the yellow police tape that she had grown accustomed to over the past few years. None of the police officers batted an eyelid at her – why would they? She recycles, pays her council tax, flosses every morning, is vegetarian, reads with local primary school children once a week, and has just reached Italian level 2 on Duolingo.

Her mood wasn't even dented when Steve called in sick, leaving her in sole charge of the shop, or when a bunch of selfie-stick wielding tourists wandered in and messed up the previously tidy shelves. Lily allowed herself a twenty-minute break at 2pm when it was relatively quiet. She sat at a juice bar eavesdropping on a pair of teenage girls discussing their dream nose job. 'No, hers is way too turned up, like a ski slope,' said one, analysing a photo on Instagram. 'Yeah, and her nostrils are huge. I prefer Kendall's,' said the other. 'I just want my bridge to be less prominent, and my tip to be perkier. I've already found the perfect surgeon.' Lily imagined a scalpel slicing through skin, following a dotted line along the girl's nose (which in all honesty was a sizable one). She was just picturing what she would look like without a nose – Voldemort-esque she thought – when her phone started ringing.

It was her Mum. 'Just checking in, darling.' She was doing this a lot lately. Ever since Lily had the panic attack and ruined her chances of getting a perfectly respectable job, she had been gently encouraging her to try to find something else.

‘Working at a bookshop is sweet, dear, but it hardly puts to use that degree of yours, not to mention the pay,’ she kept repeating. Lily could hear her Dad watching the rugby on TV. ‘Touch, pause, engage,’ demanded the ref.

Long sigh; ‘We won’t be helping you pay your rent forever you know, love.’

‘Yes Mum, I know. I have been looking every day.’

‘And did you find anything you like the sound of?’ A roar from the crowd, and squeals of delight from her Dad.

‘Dave! Please shush.’

‘Yes, I applied to a few.’ She *has* been applying to at least three a day for two months now and was yet to hear back from any.

‘Brilliant. Well I’m sure you’ll hear something soon.’

‘Fingers crossed.’

The exchange always went like this. Every week, rotating between Mum and Dad. Lily was now avoiding returning home to their questions and well-meaning advice. Although she was missing the fresh country air and home-cooked food. She wanted to see the stars at night and wake up to the chiming of church bells and distant mooing and the robin who sings its heart out every morning at 5am. They live in a cottage on the edge of the Cotswolds, all honey-coloured stone and ponies grazing in a paddock. The kind of place where gossip spreads like wildfire. The heartland of the Conservatives - her Dad is one of them. Tory councillor and Boris Johnson admirer; a ‘Take Back Control’ type. He still doesn’t know Lily voted Remain. But Lily had such a love/hate relationship with London: yes, it was

miserable during winter, expensive, and cut-throat, but it also allowed blissful anonymity. She relished nothing more than slipping into the crowd and being forgotten.

Later, Lily closed the shop and took a detour along Regent's Canal. The evenings were just beginning to get lighter, and the sky was crisp and clear after a bout of showers. A pinky smudge high above the rooftops heralded the descending sun, just out of eyeline, probably somewhere behind a skyscraper. She walked along the towpath towards Hackney, quiet now except for the occasional cyclist whizzing past in a flurry of bells, and the beating of a pigeon's wings. The sound of sirens was never far away, and the smell of weed. She breathed in a big gulp of air pollution, and slowed her heart so it wasn't racing so much. There were snowdrops lining the edge of the path. The word 'BREAD' had been spray-painted in silver on to the underside of a bridge. To her left the swirling black water had taken on an eerie sheen in the twilight – you couldn't see the bottom. Lily wondered how long it would take for someone to rescue her if she fell in.

She was teetering on the edge of a sinkhole. But instead of fearing the darkness below, she desired it.

'Don't even think about it,' said a voice from behind. Lily turned around to find an old man sat on a bench watching her. He was wrapped in a sleeping bag.

'I've tried it, and it doesn't solve things. Trust me.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking about jumping in, don't worry,' she lied, flashing him a smile.

'I know that look,' he replied pointing at his eyes, which were sunken and encircled by crinkled skin. She

could tell he used to smile a lot. But he wasn't smiling now. She approached him and offered a few pounds.

'I don't want your money,' he said. Lily gave it to him anyway. And then she sat down next to him. They listened to the buzz of distant traffic. Commuters making their way home on a Tuesday night, thinking about what to have for dinner. Lily's stomach rumbled.

'This city can suck the life out of you. Ya know?'

She nodded. Yes, she knew.

'Don't let it.'

The corners of his mouth twitched. It was an almost smile. She thanked him and walked into the darkness.

01/03/2019: Greta Thunberg's climate strike week 28, the first cherry blossom begins to bloom, 29 days until the Brexit deadline.

Lily decided it was time she bought a new kitchen knife – she had struggled with her blunt one for too long. The woman at the checkout warned her it was sharp. Of course it is, it's a knife, thought Lily. 'Be careful of those little fingers!' the woman chuckled as she walked out.

That afternoon Lily was rearranging the bookshop's poetry section when she heard a familiar voice after the tinkle of the doorbell. It was a Scottish burr. Warm and smooth, like butter melting into a toasted crumpet. It slid down her spine and made her knees almost give way. It was him. She was standing on the other side of the shelves which split the shop down the middle – invisible to anyone standing in the front half of the shop, which he was. Lily peered between the rows of books that had, just a split second ago, been the focus

of her attention. There he was; tall and broad, wearing that plaid shirt he always wore, chatting affably to Steve, a Daunt Books canvas bag slung over his shoulder. The man who cost her her first. The catalyst of all this disappointment. He was looking for Ali Smith's latest masterpiece, of course he was. Why was he here? Did he know Lily worked here? Was he teasing her? The past two years came flooding back. She fought back the urge to vomit. When he left – as quickly as he entered – she rushed after him, tripping up on the uneven pavement as she followed him towards Shoreditch High Street Station.

'Hello stranger!' he said, looking surprised. His floppy hair had flecks of grey around the edges. His smile was just the same; roguish, inviting. Don't fall for it Lily. Not again. She smiled back – wide, so her dimples appeared. Acting nonchalant, she asked how he was, what he was up to, what a coincidence that they had bumped into each other? She didn't listen to his answers - she just took in his face hungrily. Those pale blue eyes that had so easily charmed her during their dissertation tutorials. She felt anger boil up inside her. They arranged to properly catch up after work at a new bar she had found down a side street just off Brick Lane. Insane cocktails she told him. It didn't exist; she had made it up.

After work, Lily stood waiting in the disused skate park behind the station that she had directed him to. The newly bought knife sat at the bottom of her satchel. The rush of a passing train ruffled her scarf, and made her dig her hands deeper into her pockets. She spotted him walking towards her, sheepishly at first, looking

bemused at the surroundings. He was so insignificant – just an ant caught in the cogs of the machine that is this city. She remembered how she idolised him; the font of all knowledge who coaxed her out of her shell only to slam it shut again. Yes, she was sure she wanted to do this. Lily was tired of being walked over. She was ready to step on some ants.

On the tube back Lily drowned out the rush hour chaos with Ludovico Einaudi. The woman sat opposite stared at her. Her face was pale with dark crescent moons under her eyes, her hair lank and heavy. She smiled and Lily realised it was her reflection in the mirror. There was a glint in her eye. A secret. The potential to slip into evil was a comforting escape. Suddenly, Lily felt the most alive she'd felt in years.

The new knife had brownish stains on it. Her flatmate didn't seem to notice as she chopped an onion for her spag bol. 'It's so much better,' she said delightfully. Lily refrained from telling her that she used it to slit the throat of the man she once loved, in one single flourish. When she had returned to the flat she had spent a good twenty minutes scrubbing the blade with bleach – listening to all those crime podcasts had paid off. It was lucky that Lily wasn't particularly squeamish; there was a lot of blood. Hot, scarlet liquid gushing so forcefully that she had to look away. When it was done, and he had finally stopped gurgling, Lily was reminded of a nature documentary she once watched where a silverback gorilla had been killed by poachers in Virunga National Park. That evening she donated £20 to the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund.

'A man in his early thirties was found dead this morning in Shoreditch, east London.' Fiona Bruce read the ten o'clock news the following evening. Lily was in the middle of an intimate moment with a jar of peanut butter. 'The cause of death was a knife wound to the throat.' Her clipped BBC voice echoed around Lily's head. It made it sound real. 'The man's watch was also stolen. The Metropolitan Police suspect he was the target of a criminal gang which is known to operate in the area. As the killing took place in a CCTV blind spot, police are appealing for any witnesses to come forward.' Lily had always liked his Rolex, she remembered it glinting from under his cuff whenever he pointed at the whiteboard.

A week late Lily's phone vibrated with a number she didn't recognise. She was sweaty after a run around the park and just wanted to jump straight in the shower but answered it anyway.

'Hello, is this Lily?' Her heart stopped. Have they found her?

'My name is Malika. I'm calling from Tower Hamlets Council about a request you made to access our free counselling service.' A sigh of relief. That was months ago thought Lily.

'Your name was put on our waiting list and now a free spot has come up. Would you still like to proceed?'

'Uhhh...' Always so indecisive, just make a decision and stick with it, said a voice in her head.

'...well actually I'm feeling alright now. I've discovered a new coping mechanism, and it seems to be working. So... no. Thanks.'

‘That’s good, I’m glad to hear it. I wish you all the best.’ She’s nice, thought Lily. She had a soothing voice, couldn’t she just keep talking?

That night Lily dreamt she had joined a circus. It’s showtime and her job is walking the tightrope in a candy-striped big top. She’s dressed in a leotard - it’s tight and uncomfortable just like the one she wore to ballet classes as a child. If she just focuses on looking straight ahead and not at the audience below she can make it across. Don’t look down, don’t look down, don’t look... too late. Lily glances down, and suddenly she is tumbling through air perfumed with popcorn and peels of laughter, the ground zooming up to meet her. Except it doesn’t. There is no impact. She woke up in a cold sweat before she hit the floor.

23/03/2019: The People’s Vote March, US-backed Syrian Democratic Force declares victory over Islamic State, six days until the Brexit deadline.

A rare day off and the heavens have opened. Typical. Lily heads to Tate Britain to get lost in J.M.W Turner’s paintings, wishing she could transport herself into the misty landscapes where golden light caresses everything and anyone it falls upon. She comes here often. It’s peaceful in the bowels of the museum, beneath the hum of the city and above the rumblings of the underground. A purgatory between worlds. Time seems to stop in front of a Turner. ‘War. The Exile and the Rock Limpet’ is her favourite. A depiction of Napoleon during his exile on Saint Helena. The sunset is blood red, the uniformed figure is isolated and looks as if

he's hugging himself. He stares into a rock pool – either at his reflection, or at the limpet that is poking out of the water. Lily can't help but feel sorry for him. She wonders what it would be like to be forced to live alone on a remote island. 'No man is an island,' wrote John Donne, but what about a woman? She imagines herself marooned on a scrap of land in the middle of the ocean, with rolling waves stretching for as far as the eye can see. No one to talk to, or even compare herself to. Ideal, thought Lily.

The torrential rain slows to a drizzle by the time she makes her way outside, so she decides to take a stroll along the Thames. Big Ben is still encased in scaffolding, looking like a spaceship had landed in the middle of the skyline. The Palace of Westminster always seems to be having repairs done. Lily wonders which will crumble first; the building or the government inside.

Lily tries to dodge the People's Vote March, but it's impossible if she wants to get to the tube. She feels like a stray dog getting caught up in a fight she doesn't want to be part of, and yet she feels happily at one with the tide of people swelling into Parliament Square, chanting, placards held high, fists thrust into the air. She lets herself get carried away on the strong current that is community. But as the person with the loudspeaker asks, 'What do we want?' and the crowd yells 'Revoke!', she starts to feel like a fraud. A familiar feeling that grips her heart and tightens her chest. Her ears fill with a delicate hum. The murmur inside a seashell. She sits down to catch her breath under the statue of suffragette, Millicent Fawcett, who holds aloft her 'Courage Calls to Courage Everywhere' banner, almost mockingly. As

if to say: 'You will never be as brave as I.' They chained themselves to railings, got arrested, went on hunger strikes, and threw themselves in front of horses in order to get the vote. And Lily? She gets heart palpitations in crowded places.

The evening brings a bombshell. Poppy is dead. Lily's best friend. Gone. Her black Labrador with a grey face and relentlessly waggy tail. The dog she ran through fields with since the age of eight, and curled up next to on the sofa every night. The dog whose velvet ears she kissed, and whose affectionate licks melted all her teenage troubles away. But now the dog is dead. Lily's parents tell her that she is buried in the garden under the apple tree she used to lay under on those hot summer afternoons. She goes out with some friends and raises a glass to her beloved pet in a throbbing club with boys grinding up against her. The music drowns out the thoughts in her head and the alcohol numbs the pain.

On the night bus she sits at the front of the top deck. The window is open; Saturday night floods in. I am and everyone is out. The smell of fumes mingles with kebabs and beer and cigarettes and something else Lily can't quite put her finger on. London's lights twinkle like a diamond necklace on the neck of a glamorous woman – stealing the limelight from the stars above. Over Tower Bridge they go with the Thames snaking underneath and zigzagging through the concrete jungle and its people, like a fault line. A mishmash of strangers and loners, outcasts and outsiders; the city is the thread that binds them all together. Lily finally gets an inkling of what it feels to belong. Perhaps all her life was just a

lead-up to this moment – this is the chrysalis, the part where she slides out of her cocoon and takes flight. She trembles like a butterfly on its first day of freedom.

Lily walks back through the residential streets of Hackney, her ears ringing. She follows the foxes as they trot along, sniffing and occasionally nibbling at some rubbish on the ground. She inhales a lungful of the night and stops to rest her aching feet. And then she hears the sound of footsteps. Heavy and full of intent, getting closer and closer. She hobbles faster along the footpath and dives down an alley. Her paranoia at fever pitch. She shouldn't have drunk all those espresso martinis. Thank goodness for her knife. She regularly takes it out with her – the bouncers never check her bag.

There is a man, intoxicated, clearly struggling to walk in a straight line. Lily hopes he'll stumble past but he stops to light a cigarette a few metres from where she is standing. As he exhales a plume of smoke, he catches her eye. She immediately turns to walk away but even in his drunken state he is quicker than her. He grabs her shoulder and pushes his beer belly against her – pinning Lily against the wall. His breath is hot and pungent. His pores ooze alcohol and sweat and longing. This time Lily isn't hesitant; she plunges her knife into his abdomen, twisting and pushing deeper and deeper until it won't go any further. His eyes widen in shock. And then she pulls it out. He releases an agonised grunt and slumps to the ground. She wipes the knife on his coat, checks to see if anyone is watching, and runs. She runs past the Betfred, the greengrocer, the estate agents, the Sikh gurdwara, the playground. All the way home. Barefoot. A smile on her lips. Flying through air.