

Virtue, by Serena Mackesy

Extract

1990: The End of the Line

I stand on the chair and take a final look around. Scuffed cream walls, heavy thirties carved mahogany wardrobe containing a selection of knee-length skirts, cardigans, coats, blouses, washed and pressed and hung carefully on hangers to prevent creasing, three pairs of dowdy brogues. Divan bed, single pillow, candlewick bedspread, regulation wavy pattern, pale pink. Sixties “look, no handles!” chest of drawers, veneered in wood-effect melamine, containing socks, white knickers, bras in white and natural, sleepwear, jumpers, more cardigans. Orange, black and purple half-length curtains whose pattern declares that they originated in the Seventies, just like me. The desk, wood-look melamine to match the drawers, is under the window to make use of the sill as extra shelf space; like the rest of the room, it is scrupulously tidy, books lined up with their edges flush both with each other and the edge of the desk, computer cleaned each day with anti-static wipes, drawers containing drawer dividers containing pens, pencils, set squares, compasses, protractors, A4 printer paper, lined notepads. Carpet in wear-well red. Imitation tweed armchair. Kettle. Tea, Nescafe, milk. Three chocolate-coloured earthenware mugs, three teaspoons, three plates, three knives, three forks, three dessertspoons. By the desk, an umbrella plant, four feet high, bought by my mother as a gift to add a personal touch to my college accommodation.

I look, and I think: the five months you’ve lived here, you’ve left no mark of yourself on this room at all. All they’ll have to do is take the books back to the library and straighten the bedspread, and no-one will ever know that you were here in the first place.

And then I kick the chair out from underneath me, and drop into space.

The moment I begin to drop, a voice goes inside me: *stupid, stupid, stupid*, and I realise that I don’t want to die. Then the rope reaches its end, and I realise that I *really* don’t want to die like *this*. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*: seventeen years of intensive education, and I can’t even tie an effective

hangman's knot. Instead of a quick snap of the neck and oblivion, I've tied a slow and vicious garrotte.

I'm making noises; scrunching, gurgling noises from the throat where I try to force my windpipe open and only spittle emerges. Try to force a hand in under the rope, can't do it, scratch skin until blood flows. Sound of breakers crashing on a distant beach, red pain as larynx bends and tries to snap. White lights. I feel my tongue swell and force its way between slack lips, eyes begin to force way out between stretched lids. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* I'm going to die and I don't want it to be this way.

My legs dangle and flail and drum against the wall, the chair, on its side, is just one inch beyond the reach of my stretching arch. Suck at air, get phlegm, can't choke, nowhere for it to go. Go to do something. Stupid. Air hisses out like a cat throwing up, but nothing goes in.

Reach above my head and grab the rope. Haul. Shoulders, upper arms, wrists, scream in pain; this is not an angle arms are supposed to life body weights at. But, God, the rope loosens slightly, or stops tightening, and by wriggling I am able to inhale, tiny gulp by tiny gulp. I can't see above my head, don't know how far I am from the hook from which I'm dangling. Try to pull myself towards it, but the rope is behind my head and it's like doing body lifts backwards.

This isn't going to work. I'm getting enough air to slow the onset of unconsciousness, but it won't stop it. I dangle like a kosher chicken, slowly kick the life from my limbs. So now I'm going to die by crucifixion. People died on the cross of strangulation; pain and blood loss and strained and broken limbs would push them into coma, and, slumping forward, they would cut off their own windpipes. I can't keep holding myself up like this. Thirty seconds more, maybe, until a muscle gives or something pops in my brain and I drop back into endspace.

White light intensifies, but black encroaches around the outside of the picture. And through the roar of the breakers, a new sound: thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump. Not rhythmic like the whoosh of my blood, but angry and off-beat and – coming from outside my head. Someone is banging at the door. I kick hard against the wall, try to shout, but no sound comes. Don't go away. Please don't go away.

“Open the fucking door!” she shouts. “I know you're in there! I can hear you! Open it!”

I drum against the wall. My arms have reach the end of their strength. Strain. Beg myself for more power, but nothing's going to work. Against all my will, my hands drop open and I fall once again to the end of the line.

Three thumps, louder than the last, and the door bursts open. Harriet Moresby crashes through, face purple and constricted with anger. She's shouting: "don't you ever, ever—" and then she gapes. Eyes almost as big as my own bullfrog bulgers, blonde hair fixed to the top of her head with a biro.

"Oh, shit," she says.

And then she turns and leaves the room.

She left me. She left me. I don't believe it. *Of course she left you. You think you deserve to have her stay?*

And then she's back, and she has something in her hand. Something long and black, like a pole. I can't see anything, really, now; white light and darkness are turning red. I know what this is. The veins in my eyes are popping. I'm dying.

The krish of metal on metal, then she leaps upward in front of me, brings her hand across above my head. Hits the rope, makes me jump and jiggle, closes the last little gap in my windpipe. I start to struggle, fight, beat at her with my hands.

"Stop it!" Harriet stuns me with a single, sharp but deadly, punch to the face, leaps once more and slashes, and I tumble to the ground.

She drops on me in an instant, slapping away my scrabbling hands, getting her fingers under the knot, pulling. It won't come. "Don't move," she snarls. Takes the Belhaven sword, one of the many *objets de la guerre* I saw coming through her door at the beginning of the first term and with which she's cut me down, pushes the tip into the centre of the knot and strains.

The sword, sharp as the day it was used on the eighth Countess, lurches forward, slices the skin of my shoulder and embeds itself in the floor, and the knot, cut at the bottom, unravels. Nothing happens. I'm still choking. Harriet pulls me upright, bangs on my back with such violence I think my heart will jump from my chest. And with a ghastly squeal, my windpipe comes open and I breathe. Collapse and lie there, heaving and shrieking, while my deliverer kicks the door closed and starts to pummel me about the face and shoulders with her fists, to shout in my face.

“Don’t you ever, *ever* do that again!” she screams, slaps my cheek, hauls me up by the collar of my shirt and shakes me. “If you ever try something like that again, I’ll fucking kill you myself!” Slap. “You stupid, stupid, stupid bitch! What the fuck do you think you were playing at?”

And then she does something I don’t expect: she hauls me into her arms and bursts into tears.

“Are you all right? Are you all right, Anna? God, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m such a fucking bitch. I didn’t mean it. Tell me you’re all right!”

My throat hurts so much I can scarcely make a noise, but I grunt and nod into her neck. Which hurts as well. My entire upper body is on fire.

“What were you *doing*? What were you doing? You can’t – you can’t–” and then she simply sobs, and I sob too.

I doubt I will ever get to the point of wanting to be dead again. It hardly seems possible to me that I am the same person now, the girl on the floor, crying for the first time in someone else’s arms. Too long alone, too long a prospect of being alone, too tired, too weak: you take a child and raise her apart from that which is gentle and that which is kind, and you tell her every day that life cannot get better than this, and one day, she will know that if life will never get better, she wants no life at all.

Ten years ago, give or take a few months. The day my life almost ended, the day it began.

Harriet, on the carpet, pulls back, wipes her face with her sleeve, wipes mine, says: “I’m sorry I hit you. Did I hurt you?”

I shake my head.

“Is it because of what I said earlier? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

Ah, but you did, I think, but as it wasn’t that, or was only partly that, I shake my head again. Many words are spoken in anger. Suicide is a dirty revenge.

“Why?”

I don’t know. How can I explain?

“I can’t,” I rasp, “I can’t do it any longer.”

And instead of asking me what I mean, or telling me I must, she just puts her arms back round me and rocks. Harriet Moresby, superbitch, embraces the world’s dullest woman and saves her life.

“Stupid thing is,” she says, “now I’m responsible for you. One minute I’m telling you I wished you’d fuck off and die, and the next minute I’ve got to keep you alive.”

I don’t know what she’s going on about.

She tuts, tucks my hair behind my ear and continues. “The Chinese say that if you save someone’s life, you’re responsible for everything that happens to them after that because they wouldn’t have a life if it weren’t for you.”

I snuffle, wipe my nose. “The Arabs say that if someone saves your life you have to dedicate your own to them in return.”

“Christ,” says Harriet. “If I ever get caught in a house fire, remind me to do it in Jordan.”