

THE  
TRUTH  
AND  
LIES  
OF  
~~ELLA~~  
~~BLACK~~

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*40 days until she dies*

I am huddled on a bench, shivering, but I don't care about being a bit cold because I'm busy. I have a pencil and a sketchpad balanced on my knees, and I'm sitting in a park in front of a view that has the Houses of Parliament in it, leaning on Jack, who is reading a book. I'm totally focused on my drawing. I'm not actually drawing the view in front of me; I do have a few pages of Big Bens in my sketchbook, but it's just not the thing that seems to be appearing on the page.

'Are you nearly done?' says Jack. 'I mean, you have to take as long as it takes, but it's going to rain and . . .'

He shifts around and looks at my drawing.

'Oh,' he says. 'Oh right – a metaphorical interpretation of the view?'

'Yep.'

'Ella Black has made me shiver on a bench for an hour so she could draw a picture of . . . Ella Black.'

'It's not Ella Black.'

'Sorry to break this to you, sweetie, but I think it really is.'

I look at it. She looks like me but she isn't me. I wish

Jack could see that, though I don't know how I could possibly expect him to. If I told him, he'd probably understand in the end, but I have never told him and I never will. I laugh a bit, from nerves, and he does too.

'How's your book?' I say.

'Brilliant, actually. The apocalypse is well underway. Hey. You know, you're right. This doesn't look quite like you. It's like you with psychotic eyes, isn't it? It's you thinking about something you really, really hate.'

I look at him. I steady my breathing. 'Yes,' I say. 'Yes, actually. It really is.'

'You're not thinking about me, are you?'

I look at Jack: blond, unexceptional-looking and one of my two best friends in the world. One of my two only friends in the world. I love his face. I love the way we know each other's secrets. Though really I know his big secret, but he doesn't know all of mine. I might not know all of his. I probably don't.

'Of course I'm not thinking about you, you dick,' I say, and a raindrop falls right on to my drawing and blurs its face. I close the sketchpad, and Jack puts away his apocalyptic thriller, and we run to a big tree and stand underneath it, looking at the rain and the people putting up umbrellas and hoods and walking fast to unimaginable places, and we wait for it to ease up enough for us to walk to Trafalgar Square and catch a train home to Kent.

We ran away to London because it was half term. We spent the morning going to free galleries and looking at art, and then we bought some books, and then we went to

sit in the park and I tried to draw the lovely view but I drew myself with psychotic eyes instead, and I know why I did and I'm glad I did.

By the time we get to Charing Cross the rush hour has started. It's later than we realized, even though I was literally looking at one of the most famous clocks in the world for quite a lot of the afternoon.

'Massive miscalculation,' says Jack.

'I know, right?'

We stand and look at the people on the concourse. It is extremely busy, not just with commuters (though mainly with them) but also with half-term people like Jack and me, people who have come to London to look at the sights and then forgotten that you need to get a train home either earlier or later than this. If we get the right train it will only take forty minutes, but it might be an uncomfortable ride. We live in a commuter town, and people are going home in their thousands.

We're about halfway back when my head starts ringing. I'm standing up, separated from Jack by two business types who got on at London Bridge and who are pretending they're still at work. One is pressing right up against me, reading some boring financial thing on his iPad. The other is hanging on to a pole as desperately as if he were a stripper and making a very important phone call about a shareholders' meeting. My head is ringing, I tell myself, because I'm standing up, and tired, and fed up. I haven't got my phone for distraction because I lost it yesterday. I

can't talk to Jack because he's too far away. I have to live in the moment, and everything is blurred around the edges because I am standing up and tired and fed up. I mutter to myself to try to keep it together. No one cares. No one notices.

By the time we're walking back to my house, though, I know things are going wrong. I should not have drawn that picture. My ears are ringing with a high-pitched sound even though we're out in the open air, hand in hand, looking normal. I grabbed Jack's hand because sometimes he can ground me, and he never minds me doing that. I try to make the ringing stop. I try to use his energy to balance myself.

It gets louder.

It

gets

louder and louder.

And although I am walking towards my house, and although I look normal, I know that I'm not a normal girl and that I have to get to the safe place; I have to get to my bedroom, with the door closed. I have to be on my own now.

I squeeze Jack's hand, and he squeezes back because he has no idea. The pavement is dark with recent rain, and the clouds are gathering again, but right now the sunset is turning the sky into a purple bruise, and everything looks like a painting.

*Please go, I say internally. Go now. You can come back later.*

She makes my vision go a bit blotchy around the edges, and that's her way of saying, *NOT. LATER. NOW.*

'Actually,' I say to Jack, 'I need to do some art homework.' I'm trying to breathe evenly, to appear normal. He doesn't seem to have noticed anything different. I do wonder whether he sees it, particularly after today, but doesn't ask because he knows I don't want him to.

'I will not impose upon the artiste any longer,' he says. He flings a hand dramatically across his brow. '*I need to paint! I live for my art!* Is that you saying you want me to bugger off?'

'Would you mind? I mean it in a nice way.' It is pressing on the inside of my head. I have to get him to go. I wish I could tell him but I can't.

I can't because I'm not brave enough. In the part of me the world sees I'm a bit of a walkover, easily bullied, easily ignored. That's the better version of me: I don't dare to try to be stroppy, particularly at a time like this, because anything could happen. The girl in my drawing might come pouring out and poison all of it. That would be the end of everything.

'Come in for a minute anyway,' I say, feeling Bella listening carefully to every word I say, 'and then – well, then yes, you can bugger off. I've got, like, a whole painting to finish and you know I'm not very sociable when that happens. Only Humphrey can come anywhere near.'

Jack laughs. 'You spoil that cat,' he says.

Then it's raining again so we run the last bit, hand in hand, up the hill to my house. We run past a woman with

long tangled hair who's struggling to put up an umbrella, and a man pushing a bike with a toddler on the back. The toddler waves at us and shouts: 'I gettin' wet!'

I wave back with my free hand and feel Bella in the other, gripping Jack, trying to use her powers to electrocute him, wishing he would die because he is normal and happy and she doesn't think that's fair.

Jack is not really normal and happy, but he is, compared to Bella. I love him. Along with Lily he is my best friend. Everyone thinks he's my boyfriend, but he's not: he's better than that. We have a thing that works for both of us.

I don't want a real boyfriend. I don't think I'll ever want a relationship. My school is a posh girls' school, but a lot of the sixth-formers live in a world in which they defer absolutely to boys. It's pathetic and it makes me mad, but I haven't been brave enough to say anything. Actually, if I tried to argue with them, Bella would jump out and smash the nearest simpering handmaiden with a fire extinguisher, so it's probably best that I bite it back.

Jack likes the best side of me, which is the only thing he sees. Hanging out with me has helped him in all sorts of ways, and for a while he raised my status so I was not a top-level target. But it didn't last long and soon after that the girls at school started on me again.

I've never told Jack about the things that happen to me at school. He would only get upset and mad, and nothing would change, apart from him being a little less happy. And I want Jack to be happy. Only Lily knows what happens, and Lily protects me from it as much as she can.

When we burst in Mum is standing in the hallway, pretending she just happens to be there, holding something in her hands and smiling in smug anticipation.

I look at it. 'My phone!' I say, and she grins and holds it out to me.

'Someone handed it in,' she says. 'The police called and I picked it up. I thought I'd lost mine too but then I found it again. It restores your faith, doesn't it?'

Mum is just saying that because it's a cliché: she doesn't need her faith restored. She's not disillusioned or cynical about anything, though she does make sure to keep us as safe as she possibly can at all times, from dangers that don't actually exist. I take my phone from her and quickly check it; everything is exactly as it was when I last saw it, yesterday morning, just before I lost it in town.

I don't think Mum has looked through it. I hope she hasn't.

Bella is inside my head, clearing her throat, demanding attention. I push her aside.

Mum doesn't look as if she's had a shock insight into my school life. She is happy to see us, Jack and me. She lives for us. She stands around in the hall waiting for me to come home because I am her life. It's weird. Obviously it's nice for me, but I do feel bad for her because her life must be boring. Sometimes I try to imagine my way into her head, and I just can't. I don't think she has a dark side at all.

She would be so upset if she knew what happened to me. That's why I can never tell her. Right now Bella

is knocking on the inside of my skull and I need to get away.

As soon as we are through the door, Mum clicks all the locks shut behind us. No house is quite as secure as ours. For as long as I can remember, keeping me safe has been pretty much Mum's career. She is compelled to make sure I am always safe; always, always safe, all the time. It's almost funny that she relaxes when I'm tucked away in my bedroom, considering that this is actually the danger zone.

Jack is grinning back at her.

'How are you, Mrs Black?' he says in his polite way. 'You're looking lovely.'

She loves that. Mum adores Jack. She wants us to get married and give her lots of grandchildren. Again, she has no idea that that can never happen, which is sweet. I mutter something because Bella is in my head and I can't talk very well at the moment.

'Biscuit?' she says. 'I've just made some. Still warm from the oven.'

I'm not going to stop to have a biscuit, but I'll save some for Bella because she might like them later. Unless they're the spelt-and-sweet-potato ones Mum made last week too, in which case no one will ever, ever want one.

'Yes please,' says Jack. He's hoping for the chocolate-chip cookies, I know it.

While he follows her into the kitchen I walk straight ahead and go into the loo and close the door and lock it and lean against it and try to breathe. I have to get rid of them both. I have to make Jack go home in the next few

minutes. My head tightens. Black spots dance across my vision.

He is sitting at the table flirting with Mum. They both do that. I think Jack finds it funny. God only knows what Mum is up to. She grins at him and looks coquettish and reminisces about her youth, and he laughs in all the right places and says the right things back to her. Neither of them particularly cares whether I'm bothered or not; and although it's gross I just roll my eyes and look away.

The biscuits are ginger and sultana. That's just about acceptable, so I take three and wrap them in a piece of kitchen roll.

'Sorry, Jack,' I say, and under Mum's approving eye I walk over and kiss the top of his head. 'Got to do some painting. See you tomorrow.'

He laughs. 'Sure. See you tomorrow, Ells. I won't hang around.'

'You're welcome to -' Mum starts to say, but I silence her with a glare and leave the room, gasping for breath, taking the stairs two at a time.

I close my bedroom door and try to breathe. My head is ringing so loudly I wouldn't be able to hear anything else, not even a fire alarm or a nuclear siren if it went off. Maybe one of those things is happening right now. I don't care if it is. I roll up my sleeves and look at the tiny lines on the insides of my arms. I'm ashamed of them. I'm never going to let that happen again.

*Be nice*, I say to Bella.

*BE NICE*, she replies, imitating me. *BE NICE.*  
*ALWAYS BE NICE.*

*Oh, please stop.*

*PLEASE STOP. PLEASE STOP. PLEASE STOP.*

*Leave me alone.*

*LEAVE ME ALONE.*

*Leave*

*me*

*alone.*

*LEAVE.*

I don't know what is me and what is her.

I put my hands to the sides of my face and scream silently like the painting. All I want is to be normal.

I draw in a shuddery breath and press the palms of my hands on the carpet, feeling the floor, being here in this moment, myself in my room. One thing I have learned over the years is how to pretend; and when this door is closed I don't have to pretend any more. It can all come out.

I pull the pictures out from under the bed. They are meticulous explosions of horror. They are filled with death and maiming and nightmares. Bella drew them and she likes to look at them. Perhaps I can assuage her with them.

I call her Bella because she is the dark side of me. It's Ella but not. It's Bad Ella. Bella. I thought of that a few years ago and it made it a bit better, because before that I called it the Monster. Anything is a tiny bit better when it has a name. Bella is better than the Monster. I didn't know then that Bella means beautiful: my Bella isn't beautiful at all. She is the opposite. But she's still Bella.

Bella is desperate to own the whole of me: I am alert and battling all the time. Sometimes I have to let her out before everything explodes. It's scary, but after that happens I feel calm and peaceful and, I think, kind of happy. Everything is balanced for a while. That's when we draw these pictures. I look at them now. They are done in black ink – huge sheets of tiny detail like Hieronymus Bosch, but with modern bits in them. Children are decapitated here. Body parts are everywhere. There is blood and murder. These pictures take us ages and I hope no one ever finds them, but they're definitely the best art I've ever done.

She doesn't want to look at them now. *LATER*, she says.

It's hard to breathe. The ringing grows louder. I push my hands down on the carpet and try harder. Humphrey is waiting, I see. Humphrey always turns up when Bella's here.

'Have a biscuit,' I say desperately, and I unfold the kitchen roll and let them all fall across the carpet. I grab one and shove it into my mouth, but Bella spits it out because she's seen something much better than a biscuit.

Humphrey has carried a terrified bird into my bedroom, somehow getting it past Mum, who would have screamed and shooed him away if she'd seen. The bird is tiny. It looks like a baby. I wonder if Humphrey pulled it out of its nest, whether its mother is missing it.

The bird is flapping its little wings and trying to fly away, even though its body has been punctured by Humphrey's teeth.

He does this often, my cat. He's very much on Team Bella rather than Team Ella. He knows.

I crawl over to it. I can't even hear the ringing any more: it's just a white noise that blocks out the mundane world. I feel Ella leaving and then I am Bella, and Ella has gone and that's good because she is pathetic. I can hardly breathe as I reach for the hammer that Ella keeps under the bed. It's a little hammer that looks ladylike and inoffensive: when Mum found it Ella said it was part of her sculpting kit for art, and she totally believed her.

I pick the tiny thing up by a feather and place it on top of a history essay, which is on top of a textbook on the floor. I straighten it, stroking it with a finger.

'Hello,' I whisper, and I am Bella through and through.

Humphrey gives me a look. He is excited. He is a bad cat and he never pretends to be anything different.

My breathing quickens as I stare at the little bird.

I can't hear anything. I can't see anything but the bird.

And I know what I'm going to do. I wouldn't have arranged the creature and got out the hammer if I didn't. I know what I'm going to do because it is what I live for.

The world is dark around the edges like a spooky photo. Everything else has faded away. Bird, book, cat, hammer.

Bella.

I feel sick, but not in a normal way. Nothing about this is normal for anyone but me.

I can see the bird trying to fly away, and I know it will never fly again. I am Bella, and I can do anything. I have the power of life and death.

I pick up the hammer, wait for a moment with it raised just high enough, savouring every second, and smash it down on top of the creature.

I  
feel  
it  
crunch.

I  
watch  
it  
shatter.

I stare at the remains. I love doing this.

‘Thanks,’ I breathe to the cat, and he inclines his head towards me in a *you’re-welcome* sort of way. A *we’re-in-this-together* way.

This is what it’s all about. I love it when I get to take over. I want to be her forever; I want her to stop being Ella Black and let me stay here, in her body. I could do anything.

The white noise starts to fade. I try to hang on to it.

*I hate doing this*, says Ella’s pathetic voice.

GO AWAY.

*I am scared.*

NO YOU’RE NOT.

‘Ella?’

The voice slices through everything and I am shrinking away to nothingness.

The ringing is back, but it’s quieter. I am Ella, cross-legged beside my bed, on the other side of the room from the door. It takes me seconds to come back to myself, to

know that I am Ella again and not Bella, and when I do I push the hammer under the bed and jump to my feet. My legs wobble. My heart pounds so hard they must be able to hear it downstairs.

Lily is standing in the doorway.

I look around, gasping for breath, drawing in great lungfuls of air and trying to use them to force the last bits of Bella away. I am in my bedroom. The walls are pink and blue, with anime posters and my sketches of Rio de Janeiro. My clothes are on the floor. There is a photo collage of me and Lily and Jack, laughing, doing ironic duck-faced pouts, posing with our arms round one another. Everything looks normal.

Everything  
looks  
normal.

But I know nothing is normal.

I don't know what she's seen. I don't know if she saw Bella lift the hammer and kill the bird. Bella is not here. She is not. Lily cannot see her. She cannot see this. She cannot. I push the darkness away, away, away.

In my head I say the words that bring me back to myself. They only work after Bella has done her thing and nearly gone.

*The universe the universe the universe, I say.*

*The universe.*

*The universe.*

*The*

*whole*

*universe.*

The only thing that chases Bella away is that cosmic perspective. If I think of the entire universe and how tiny I am, everything feels manageable because nothing matters. Nothing at all matters. Ella doesn't matter and neither does Bella. Unfortunately, this really does only work when she's on her way out. It doesn't stop her arriving.

I discovered the universe thing by mistake. I was in the downstairs loo, aged about eleven, battling a demon I understood even less than I do now. I had my back against the locked door and I was pulling the wallpaper off the wall because I couldn't control myself and I had to destroy something. As I did it, Bella started to fade, and I read a line in a poem that is still hanging up on our downstairs loo wall.

*Whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe  
is unfolding as it should.*

*No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

*The universe is unfolding.*

It made Bella leave me alone. Now I've refined it to just the words *the universe*. I say them over and over again.

Bella has gone.

My lips move but I don't think any sound comes out.

*I must be nice.*

*Be nice.*

*Be normal.*

*I*

*have*

*to*  
*be*  
*normal.*  
*Smile.*  
*You*  
*must*  
*smile.*

‘Oh, hey, Lily,’ I say. My voice trembles but the words are kind of right. ‘Um. Don’t come in!’

I snap the last bit as she steps into the room. She stops. I take a wobbly step towards her then sit on the bed because my legs give out.

‘Oh, Ella.’ Lily is lovely. She is confused by my snapping at her because I never do that. ‘Are you OK? Your mum said I could come up. I just came by because you haven’t got your phone and I wanted to –’ I see her look at my bed. I see her notice my phone. ‘Oh, you got it back?’

‘Yes. Back. Um.’

*Be normal.*

‘Sorry,’ I say. I form the word carefully, trying to say the thing that Ella would say. ‘The cat brought in a bird. It’s *really* grim. It’s made me sick. Sorry. Really don’t come in. I had to put it out of its misery. I . . . had . . . to . . .’

It’s too difficult to come back to myself. It’s harder every time. One day I won’t make it. One day I will be stuck as Bella. I know she wants that. I would hate it. It can never happen.

The ringing is fainter still, and then it just about stops. The edges of the world are sharp again.

‘Oh, shitting hell,’ says Lily. Lily could never understand, and I would never tell her because if I did she might not be my friend any more and I need her. *I need her.* She pulls me back, often, and always without knowing. ‘Oh, Ella. You poor thing. I’ve got a tissue. Hang on.’

She is walking towards me. Humphrey crouches, then runs, streaking past her legs and out of the room and down the stairs.

I pull her down to sit next to me on the bed and take her face in my hands. I cannot let her look at what I did. Her springy hair on my fingers grounds me. I am with Lily now.

‘Seriously,’ I say, my face right in front of hers. ‘Don’t look. I’ll clean it up. Could you maybe run down and get a plastic bag from my mum?’

I am hiccupping. It is all too much. I’ve always managed Bella better than this. I’ve always kept Lily away from her. Lately it has been getting worse.

‘Sure. Shit, Ella. You poor, poor thing.’ She puts an arm round me, and just for a moment I lean in and bury my face in her shoulder. Her hair is loose. It tickles my face. I cling on, and then I force myself to let go.

When she has left I put my head in my hands. This is awful; I can’t keep it up. Jack must have wondered why I needed him to leave. Lily actually walked into my room and found Bella in it. Next time it will be worse and then everyone will know. I can’t get my thoughts straight or stop shaking, but I have to clean this up. I can’t let Lily know, and I can’t let Jack know either.

They cannot know.

They  
cannot  
know.

I leave the poor smashed bird where it is, and fold the history essay around it. I am shaking, and a feather falls out of the package. I kick the textbook out of the way and try to pick up the stray feathers, though I really need to vacuum to get the carpet clean.

Mum will be pleased to see me spontaneously using the vacuum cleaner. So that will make everyone happy for a bit.

When Lily comes back with the bag I drop in the bird in its essay coffin, and drop most of the feathers in too.

‘I’ll just wash my hands.’

Lily ties the handles of the bag and takes it downstairs while I lock myself in the bathroom and try to breathe without it catching, without gasping or taking such shallow breaths that I feel dizzy. I wash my hands with lots of soap. I splash my face with cold water and soap, and I put on some moisturizer to make it soft and smooth. I take off my old eye make-up. I breathe in and out. In. Out. In, deeply. Out, deeply. I close my eyes. I remember smashing the bird. It made Bella happy, and Bella is part of me.

I do not want that to make me happy.

I do not want to be part Bella.

I do not want it to build up inside me like this.

I do not want to be someone who smashes birds with a hammer.

I do not want to be this girl.