**Identity**

The café we choose for our fortnightly meet ups is typical of the town we both come from: shabby and change resistant. Had it been located in an affluent area, some fancying-up could possibly have made it artisan. As it is, it remains authentic in an unstructured, haphazard way.

It’s a scheduled 30 minute catch-up with my brother, who still lives round here whilst I am based a little further west, on the outskirts bordering the City. Despite my home being close to the motorway, I can breathe easier there - blurred by people in transit. Here I face a rooted council of onlookers.

The scenarios rarely alter but the cast may vary. Today I recognise overly loud conversations with the wrong level of pitch. Words chosen to disguise that they’re really focussed on me. Others more honestly staring at me, slack mouthed or gurning at their companions. Is that her? I brought my title with me. I was once named Karen Styles, but here I am more commonly known as ‘*mother-of-the-girl-who-drowned-on-holiday’*. A moniker I’ve been shackled to for almost ten years.

Brother goes to counter to order more coffee for us.

‘Hey isn’t that…?’

Small town, small houses. This area is in possession of a dramatically lower than average escape rate and even fewer incomers. Once you’re branded here there is no reforming and certainly no forgetting. The concept of moving on hasn’t reached Churchtown. Ideas and opinions don’t refresh.

The extended version of my title is ‘mother-of-the-girl-who-drowned-on-holiday ***in Italy.’*** This name comes with its own particular brand of judgement. Stepping outside the mundane is for people deemed ‘no better than they ought to be’.

Not many in this town graduate to new titles once they have been bestowed. The gaudy hair salon across the street owes its fame to a student on work experience. She became ‘*girl-who-was-raped-behind-Darling’s bar*.’ This title followed her some way out of town and was there waiting when she arrived back with her honours degree in chemistry. It will be always be waiting, observing her subsequent behaviour and its intonation will adjust accordingly.

I rub at the tacky veneer through which ancient scars on the tarnished table are still visible. Brother is chatting to ‘*waitress-who-regularly-skipped-school-AND-smoked’*. I think she’s happily married with kids now, but I’m not sure.

Just occasionally a remarketing occurs but it’s rarely an upgrade and usually exists in relation to the first title. The *‘teacher-whose-husband-ran-off-with-girl-from-Sainsbury’s-chicken-counter’* became ‘*her-who-remarried*-*a taxi driver*.’ A title in which both the verb and the profession battle for salacious dominance. The first title slipped to a byline in her potted biography.

Brother returns with a slice of Bakewell. It’s too hard to cut the base with my fork. I just peel off the icing and suck it from my fingers. I watch him pick at his crumpet. We both eat with our fingers; it’s a family trait. It’s restful being with brother. He doesn’t need to make conversation. I’m weary of small talk, of people keen to display their best faux- grief. And I’ve become immune to people asking about my sons - conversations crudely signposted - reminding me how lucky I am to have two more children. What a consolation that must be.

You’re quite correct in your loaded inference: to have three children was a little greedy. Clearly, I proved I couldn’t keep an eye on all of them.

Before I registered as defined by my own tragedy, I was almost *‘the-woman-photographer*.’ I’d sold a small number of pictures to the local newspapers and was well underway with my planned exhibition. But that name didn’t stick as there was nothing really juicy in it. Titles are only rewarding in hushed tones.

I gave all my equipment away.

Someone half-waves to me as they go past the window. By now, I’m highly tuned to an automatic reflex; she’ll be cursing herself as she hurries away. Actually, I can place her too: it was ‘*woman-who-nicked-the Christmas-fund’* in her first ever job. She must be over fifty by now.

Brother clears his throat.

‘I’ve met someone.’

I’m shocked. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, it’s just we rarely have news to impart to each other. We exist in comfortable stagnation. He’s eight years my junior but I’ve never known him have a girlfriend since *‘bossy-violinist-who-dumped-him-on-his-21st’.* He reaches for his phone and flicks through his pictures, his face softening as he locates the ones to display.

He turns his phone towards me. I recognise her.

‘How long?’

‘18 months. On the downlow for a while but now we’re thinking we might get married.’

 He shrugs at me but he’s blushing slightly. It makes him look younger. Unconfined. I have never categorised him as married or with kids. He’s just brother.

I look at the pictures of the pale woman gazing up at him as he leans into her wheelchair, his hand cupped over hers. I know exactly who she is. She grew up near us. The family were the *‘scruffiest-in-the-street*.’ Dad had some kind of breakdown and lost his job. Her mum - initially in possession of all the sympathy - morphed over the years into ‘*angry-alcoholic’* lamenting loudly in The King’s Head. The daughter’s early life had been marred by spinal operations.

 I look up into brother’s anxious eyes and smile at him.

‘She’s a pharmacist now’ he offers…

‘She’s Emily’ I reply.

‘John and Emily’.

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Josephine left her job in education to undertake a MA in Creative Writing from Manchester Metropolitan University. She loves reading, theatre, and is currently working on a collection of short fiction. She has been published in the Manchester Review, Cabinet of Heed and Lunate.