

# Chapter 1 – Shame

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## *Gin Bottle Blues*

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I kick the pebbles on the side of the road as I stumble home, guided by the flickering streetlights. Alcohol throbs in my veins, chased by memories of the night just over.

*Harry's being an arsehole, I think. He doesn't realise how good he has it.*

I didn't mean to punch him – though I'd *kill* for a girl like Lucy.

Harry had stared at me in such shock when I'd said that. I remember how violently I shoved a table over which had a load of drinks on it, and then was immediately thrown out of the bar by a six-foot black bouncer.

*I lost my halo in that bar fight. I really shouldn't have been so careless.*

I drink liberally from my pocket hipflask – it's filled with straight, cheap vodka that tastes like acid. I cough and wipe my mouth on the back of my hand. Some drunk girls stare at me, so I show them my middle finger.

They scuttle off into a dingy alley, dodging an upended wheelie bin that drunken yobs have tipped over. A mangy orange fox darts under a fence as they pass, the only other sign of life in the barren city street.

My sister Racine told me I drink too much, but she can bloody talk. *Fuck her.*

I still remember her falling over on the way home from a kebab house that time. She'd been holding a box of chicken nuggets and gouged out her knee to save them: she still has the scar.

Isn't this what all twenty five year-olds do? So busy posing, we forget real life. *Bitterness*

*doesn't become you, Thom.*

Am I talking to myself?

There's never an end of the story, it's just your point of view. The only finished stories we can tell are about dead people.

I shake my head. Now, I'm even boring myself.

Philosophical musings aside, I'm starting to feel sick. Leaning on a bench for support with one knee on the ground, I tip my head forwards and heave. A delicate concoction splatters on the pavement.

*Somebody help me, call a doctor, but please don't call the police.*

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I wake up, still on the pavement, head under a bench with my own vomit encrusted all over my leather jacket. I have no wallet or phone on me anymore.

*What day is it?* Sunday, I think.

Judging by the watery daylight it's very early in the morning. I can only hear birds tweeting, and luckily there doesn't seem to be a soul around to witness my low point.

I assume I haven't been sexually assaulted – though I can't be sure. My whole body hurts, but not *that* part.

If I'm to trust in the powers of my own narration – which is probably a mistake – I'd say I drank too much last night.

*At least no one took my hipflask*, I think in satisfaction, patting my jacket pocket. Some wet vomit comes off on my hand and I quickly stop.

I briefly toy with the idea of taking another sip of vodka but my stomach curdles, bristling in protest against me.

I haul myself up with help from the bench and trudge home, head pounding. I eventually tumble through the front door, catching myself on the wooden banister before staggering upstairs to my room.

I lay face down on the bed for some undefined amount of time until Harry emerges from

his own room, dark hair wildly ruffled. His usually pretty face looks somewhat like raw meat. *Did I do that?*

*Fuck*, I think.

“What happened to you?” I say, warily.

Fortunately, Harry doesn’t even remember the argument we had.

It turns out he got in another fight when he left the bar (or, more accurately, was also thrown out like me).

I’m shocked to discover that he’s in an even worse state than I am – though his black-and-blue face should probably have been my first clue.

All my anger melts away as I try to think of a way to help my best friend.

“Cigarette?” I offer, but he pulls a sick face. “Fry up, then?”

He nods weakly.

Neither of us calls the police, but both of us definitely feel like idiots.

Racine really lets me have it when she finally gets to speak to me. I don’t have a phone anymore so she’s had to call both of us on Harry’s phone.

Apparently she’s not happy that we left her in the bar with Lucy when we got kicked out.

I’m not interested in a fight, so I hang up quickly after I’ve allowed her to admonish me for five minutes.

Harry raises his eyebrows – perhaps the only part of his face unbruised – when I return his phone. He slips it back into his pocket and winces.

“Dude – do you need to go to hospital?”

He shakes his head. “Though, I don’t know how I can go into work tomorrow, looking like this,” he says forlornly, frowning slightly (he soon stops when that also seems to hurt).

His phone rings again and this time it’s Lucy, who’s sympathetic towards Harry’s woe and offers to come round to bathe both our wounds. In contrast, Racine has told me I’m an idiot and that I’m lucky not to be dead – though I might come to wish I was.

I try to ignore the resentment still simmering somewhere in my chest, despite our unspoken truce. Harry's going to break up with Lucy and hurt her so much in the process.

*She's my friend, I tell myself. That's why I care so much.*

After we finish mopping up bacon and sausage grease from our plates, I busy myself playing *Call of Duty* while Harry lies back on the sofa and groans. *A right pair we make.*

Though even with a fat lip and black eye, Harry's still the most handsome of the two of us.

"Hey, mate – did we fall out last night?" he asks suddenly, just as I'm blasting at a target with an AK 47. My bullet flies conspicuously wide of the mark.

"What? I don't think so," I say casually, trusting my acting skills and firing a blizzard of bullets to cover up the miss. "What would we fall out about?"

A pause. "Nothing," he says, closing his eyes again.

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The doorbell rings that afternoon while I'm napping deeply on the sofa. I crack open one eye but I don't know where Harry's gone, so I decide to ignore it. Darkness reigns again.

The doorbell rings again insistently.

"Aaargh!" I shout.

Groaning, I lurch to my feet, clutching my head and swearing.

"Coming, coming!" I shout at the infernal ringer. I wrench open the door and stand face-to-face with... *Racine*.

"Hi, Racine," I say weakly, like a student caught red-handed by a teacher, and I attempt to disarm her with my best innocent smile.

Unfortunately, she is radiating a mixture of fury and no-bullshit, and is having none of it.

"What happened to you, Thom?" she squawks as she storms past me into the hall, kicking shoes and unopened letters out of the way. "You're lucky I didn't tell Charlie what happened!"

"Don't you dare tell anyone," I shout, trying to sound threatening, but she gives me a

withering look. “What would *Charlie* do, anyway?”

Charlie is our brother and Racine’s twin, and he’s so apathetic about everything, it hurts.

“Where’s Harry?” she demands, changing the subject so rapidly I don’t have time to blink.

“I think he went out,” I mumble uncertainly – earning myself another glare from Racine.

“*Have you two fallen out?*” she says, dangerously.

“No!” I protest, fiddling with a packet of cigarette filters awkwardly. “Neither of us remembers last night, at all. *At all.*”

“Oh, is that right?” Racine says mock-innocently. “Well, you’re lucky, because *I* do.”

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She wrinkles her nose at my leather jacket lying on the dining table, still decorated with last night’s shame.

“Aren’t you going to clean that?” she demands, disgusted.

“When I get round to it,” I say, rolling a cigarette and lighting the tip. Smoking makes me feel a bit sick but I’m thinking it might mask my face a little.

Racine is giving me what I am sure she thinks is a piercing look but I avoid making eye contact, refusing to give her any satisfaction.

“So, last night?” she probes, after a minute.

“What about it?”

She gives me an impatient look. “You had an argument with Harry because he’s going to dump Lucy.” *Cutting right to the chase.*

“That’s a secret,” I blurt. “You can’t tell Lucy. And you shouldn’t listen in on other people’s... *conversations.*” My head spins, the graffitied dining table lurching towards me.

“Well, you shouldn’t have them at a thousand decibels in a bar where everyone can hear you,” she shoots back – always with an answer to everything. “I remember you saying he’s a fucking twat, and that you’d kill for a girl like Lucy. *Verbatim.*”

I attempt a dismissive look but feel my cheeks redden in betrayal.

“...So what if I did?” I say lamely, putting a hand up to my face to try to steady the world. *Damn her memory.* Racine has an annoying habit of remembering everything from nights out – despite being as drunk as any of us.

Still, I can tell she’s not trying to upset me.

“Is that how you really feel?” she says, gently. “Or were you just drunk?” I recognise a get-out clause.

“No! Well, sort of. Maybe.” I squirm visibly.

“It’s not like you to be so... violent.”

“I know.” There’s no point in denying it, and I don’t want to start a fight with my sister as well – of all people.

Her eyes grow a bit softer. “Oh, Thom. What are you going to do about this?”

“Isn’t there a script for how this goes?” I say harshly. “In this part of the film, you encourage me to tell Lucy how I feel, and I go and make a twat of myself.”

“This isn’t a film, Thom,” Racine says flatly. “*Don’t* tell Lucy how you feel. That can only end terribly.”

“Wow, thanks,” I retort.

“I can’t lie to you. You’re my brother, and I just want to stop you from doing something stupid.”

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