

Defining Shell

The first I heard of it was when my brother, Billy, phoned me. He was fizzing with happiness.

‘Guess what? I’m engaged,’ he gushed.

I almost dropped the phone. My older brother, the archetypal bachelor. I didn’t even know he was seeing anyone. Eventually, I found my voice.

‘What? I mean, to whom?’ My mouth was flapping open like the broken lid on my kitchen bin.

He was laughing at the other end. ‘Shell, are you flustered?’

‘Well, yeah. Course I am. I didn’t expect you to say that. Have you known her for long? What’s she called? Where does she live?’

‘Slow down. Come to Mum’s on Saturday for tea, and you can meet her yourself. She’s called George, and you can ask her all the rest when you meet her. Five o’clock. Don’t be late!’

‘Er, yeah, no problem. We’ll be there.’

He did his trademark thing of putting the phone down without saying anything else. If anyone else did it, it would have been considered rude, but with him you kind of just got used to it. It was pure Billy.

I was straight on the phone to Mum. ‘Have you talked to Billy? Has he told you about this girl?’

‘Of course he has. Just ten minutes ago. So, are you and Jamie coming then?’

‘Yes, we’ll be there. Jamie never misses one of your dinners, does he! Says it’s the only time he gets proper food, with my cooking.’

Mum laughed. ‘The cheek of him! See you Sunday, then.’ She put down the phone abruptly before I could answer. Perhaps it was a family trait. Was I the same? I didn’t think so. I made a mental note to ask Jamie.

This was only the third girl Billy had brought home in his thirty-one years. And he was marrying her! So, come Sunday, there we were, all lined up stiff and formal on the sofa, waiting for Billy and George Thingy to arrive. Apart from my partner, Jamie, who couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about, we were all listening hard for the front gate to click

and squeak as it always did. Dad's eyes slid constantly to the front window then away again, and Mum's voice was higher than usual. She had her best dress on, and made Dad put on a tie. Jamie, as ever, hadn't even bothered to get changed. The gate squeaked, then the front door banged hard. Billy never did anything quietly. We shot each other glances across the room and tried to act normal. Jamie rolled his eyes and gave a small sigh. 'You people!' he muttered. Someone's stomach rumbled loudly; I think it was Jamie's. The door handle began to turn. All eyes fixed on the figure in the doorway but it was only Billy standing there, with a stupid grin on his face.

I stifled the urge to yell 'Shift out of the way, let's get a good look at her then,' and craned my neck to see beyond him.

A stunning, blonde vision in a figure-hugging pale pink dress and the highest heels I'd ever seen stepped past him with a nervous smile, perfect teeth, and cerulean blue eyes. She was gorgeous and my blood seemed to freeze in my veins at the sight of her, for beneath the beauty was an odious, noxious creature full of spite and hate. I fought the nausea that swamped me. This woman had made my life a living hell in high school. She wasn't George Anything — she was Gina Harris, the girl who had punched me, kicked me, pulled my hair out, and verbally abused me every day for almost two years. And I never told a soul. I was too scared of her.

My mum was getting out of the chair and walking towards her with her hand out.

'How lovely to meet you. I'd like to say Billy's told us all about you, but he hasn't. We didn't even know he was seeing anyone.'

I was going to faint if I didn't get out of this place. Beside me, Jamie was touching my arm and leaning in.

'Shell? Are you OK? You're white as a sheet. What's the matter?'

The nausea had me lurching to my feet, and I shot from the room as if fired from a gun. In the back garden, I gulped great lungfuls of air and tried to stem the shaking but it was no good. I was a teenager again in a school uniform. Jamie was beside me in an instant.

'Sweetheart, what's wrong? You look terrible.'

I was shaking all over. How could my brother marry a woman like that? People like that never change, do they? But I couldn't get the words out.

Mum and Dad didn't appear. Probably too busy becoming best friends with Gina Harris. All those years ago, Mum had known something at school wasn't right, but I still

hadn't told her. I went from loving school to not wanting to get up in the morning and go. She'd begged me to tell her what was wrong, but I couldn't. Instead, I stopped eating and became dangerously thin. That became the focus of my problem in everyone else's eyes. I wasn't anorexic, like they said. I was terrified, victimised and being abused by the woman who stood, larger than life and nice as pie in my parents' living room, the woman who was about to become my sister-in-law. I had to get a grip.

A fury I didn't know I was capable of spiralled up from nowhere, growing in intensity. I was bigger and stronger now, not the frightened schoolgirl I'd been. Plus, this was *my* family, and she was on *my* turf. Within seconds, I was back across the lawn and striding into the house, back into the living room where the cosy little scene played out before my eyes.

Gina Harris was sitting on my parents' sofa with my mum and dad on one side and my brother on the other.

'Darling?' Mum looked up as I rocketed across the room and stood in front of Gina with my hands on my hips. I could feel the heat blazing in my cheeks, and the smile on her face faltered then disappeared. Just as I thought, there was no recognition in her eyes whatsoever. I was no one to her. Never had been. I was just someone to bully. A *non-person*. I wasn't special, as I wasn't the only one. Her and her gang had victimised a few of us.

'Remember me, *Gina*?' I asked, my voice harsh and rising. 'No, you don't do you?

Gina was shaking her head from side to side, and her lovely blue eyes were stretched wide. She was a picture of innocence. She genuinely didn't remember me. Finally, she found her voice.

'I'm sorry. What? I don't know what you mean.'

Billy had jumped to his feet and was grabbing my arm. 'What the hell's going on, Shell?'

I turned on him and wrenched my arm out of his grip. '*She* made my life hell at school, but you wouldn't know that because you'd gone to uni by then and only came home twice a year.'

Gina was still staring at me without a hint of recognition. It was the final insult. Taking a step forward, before I could think, I slapped her hard across the face and it felt good.

‘Do you remember all those times you did that to me in the girls’ toilet? And in the woods behind the chemistry building? And pulled my hair? And the nipping, scratching and kicking? You spat on me twice, too. Do you remember me now? Michelle Logan? Or as you used to call me, *‘The Spotty, Speccy Cow’*, among other names. And I wasn’t the only one, was I? Is that why you don’t remember me?’ I turned from her to face my family. ‘*She* ruined my life. She’s the reason I stopped going to school and developed anorexia. And she hasn’t got a bloody clue!’

Billy was gawping at Gina. So were Mum, Dad and Jamie. Gina had frozen, and the colour had drained out of her face. She looked like a beautiful marble statue, porcelain-white, hollow and empty. I couldn’t stand the sight of her anymore and turned to Jamie.

‘Take me home, please,’ I said quietly, and he nodded, took my hand and led me from the house without another word.

In the car on the way home, shaking and sweating, yet freezing cold, I told him everything she’d ever done to me, about how I’d never told anyone because I’d lived in such fear of her for such a long time. She’d haunted my every waking moment and also my sleep, for years. Everything I’d worked so hard to forget came flooding back, and I was a terrified child again. Jamie held my hand and listened to me talk, his face alternating between red with fury and white with shock. At one point he muttered ‘I want to kill her,’ under his breath.

I went straight to bed when we got home, and he came with me. He lay there with me for hours, stroking my hair, until it was dark. My phone rang several times and I ignored it, eventually falling into a deep but restless sleep.

Morning dawned grey and dull, and with it came a persistent hammering on the door. Jamie looked out of the window.

‘It’s your mum and dad. And Billy. Shall I let them in?’

I pulled myself up in the bed, feeling spent and hollow.

‘OK. Might as well.’

If they were going to take her side, it would be too much to bear. But what else would they do? She’d probably spent half the night making out I was a madwoman. I’d certainly behaved like one. I’d never ever hit another person in my life. I was meek and mild, the never-say-boo-to-a-geese sort of person. Until now. I got out of bed, tied my dressing gown tight around me, and went downstairs to meet them.

Jamie said, 'I'll make some coffee.'

Mum was the first to make a move, the furrows in her forehead deeper than I'd ever seen them.

She sat on the sofa next to me and picked up my hand. It sat limply in her firm one.

'Darling,' she said. 'I had no idea. None of us did. Why didn't you ever say anything?'

'I was just too scared. She petrified me.'

She was crying now, and that made me feel bad. You shouldn't make your mum cry, should you? Dad stood stoically behind her, but his eyes were moist and red-rimmed. They never left mine and after the briefest of nods, I knew he believed me. He was on my side, and so was Mum. That just left Billy.

Billy and I had always been close but after he left for uni, we hadn't seen that much of him. He had his own friends, and me... well I'd like to say I had mine, but I didn't really. The few friends I'd had were driven away when Gina began bullying me, scared they'd be next in line if they'd stuck up for me. I tried to read the expression in Billy's eyes, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I'd attacked the woman he loved and probably ruined his life, just like she'd ruined mine all those years ago. I waited for him to speak first. Eventually, squatting down beside me, he did.

'Shell,' he began, his voice breaking and faltering. 'I didn't know she was capable of anything like that. It's made me realise I didn't know her at all. Will you forgive me for bringing her back into your life like that? She's gone. For good.'

'Gone? How? I thought you were going to marry her.' My voice was thick with unshed tears, and I swallowed hard. 'I thought you loved her.'

'I did. I do. But I could never be with anyone like that. You've probably done me a favour...' His voice trailed off, and he gazed out of the window. I'd never seen Billy cry, ever, and even now, when his heart was breaking, he didn't cry. But he looked like he wanted to.

I gripped his hand. Poor Billy. My kind, gentle brother didn't deserve this. He'd done nothing except fall for the wrong woman. Instead of it just being me she'd destroyed, that woman had now ripped apart our whole family. Her face had haunted me for years, the stuff of nightmares, and now she was back. I had to be strong and erase her from my life once more. I'd done it before, so I could do it again. I closed my eyes. My whole body trembled like a field mouse quivering before the threshing blades of an oncoming combine harvester. We sat and talked all morning and for the second time in my life, I talked about

what had happened to me at school. Mum cried, Dad looked heartbroken, and Billy's eyes filled up once or twice as he squeezed my hand tight. Then they left, saying I looked done in and needed to sleep.

The following week, a letter arrived in the post addressed to me. It was written in a hand I didn't recognise. Curious, I ripped it open and unfolded the heavy sheets of thick cream paper. The writing was large, curly and slanting, and looked somehow feminine. I flipped to the last of the five pages and saw it was signed *Georgina*. With shaking hands, I began to read from the beginning. She was sorry, it said, for everything she'd done to me. She didn't know why she'd done those disgusting, vile things. They were done in another time by a different person, she said. She'd had to confront all the awful things she'd done to all of us. And she remembered me. When she first started picking on me, she'd been jealous. I was everything she wasn't: petite where she was tall, curvy where she was gangly, dark and exotic-looking where she was blonde and pasty. And I'd rarely been spotty, she'd just thrown that in for good measure. I couldn't believe it; her jealous of me? Following that was a tale of a girl with a miserable home life: an absent father, volatile mother and no other close family. She'd made peace with her parents as an adult, but they'd shaped her life from a young age and contributed to her being what she became. Was this a reason or just excuses? I didn't know, but none of it seemed like a reason to ruin someone else's life. She claimed she had worked hard to become a changed person and put the shame of what she'd done behind her, although she'd never plucked up the courage to apologise to her victims. It had a ring of truth about it, but maybe I was too blinded by shock, rage and fear to see it fully. After reading it, I resisted the urge to rip it into tiny pieces and throw them away. Instead, I folded it back into its envelope and shoved it right to the back of a kitchen drawer, at the same time sealing it in a small compartment at the back of my mind. Then I made a concerted effort to get on with my life. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said of Billy.

My lovely, happy, chatty brother became a depressed and withdrawn shadow of his former self. He looked terrible, hid himself away, and refused to see anyone. OK, so he'd had a shock, suffered a bereavement in a way, but still it went on. Days turned into weeks, and he showed no signs of improvement. In short, without her he was a mess. He became sullen and irritable, and I began to wonder if, deep down, he resented and blamed me for the loss of her. I hated to see him this way. Which made me think: could I forgive her and in

doing so, give him permission to do the same. Can't we all change over time? I've done some things I'm not proud of in my life, and I've never been held accountable for them by anyone other than myself. In other words, I'd got away with them. But Gina Harris hadn't. I'd made her face them, admit them and apologise for them and ultimately, wasn't that what I had wanted? A small, mean part of me was glad she'd lost the thing most precious to her but then, so had my brother, and it was breaking my heart to see him. So, one day, I unearthed the letter from the drawer and knocked on the door to his flat, refusing to go away until he let me in. He looked a mess, with his unshaven face and bloodshot eyes, and I could smell he'd been drinking. I sat him down and told him to forgive her. Either try to get her back or move on but forgive her anyway. For a brief second, hope flared in his eyes before dying away again. She'd begged him to get back with her, he told me. He couldn't, not now he knew what she was capable of. I told him if I could forgive her, why couldn't he? What she did no longer defined me. I gave him the letter to read.

'If you love her, go and get her. I'm OK with it, now. Really.' And I was.

Thankfully, he listened and did just that. I made my peace with her too, and she's lovely to me, even though I can never fully forget what she did. But I think I have forgiven her. And today, two years later, they got married. I'm not saying we'll ever be best friends or anything, but at least I'm trying. After many heart to hearts with her, I believe her when she says she's truly sorry for behaving as she did. My parents have had to work hard to forgive her too, but they've come to their own acceptance and understanding for my brother's sake.

Now, Billy leaves his wedding reception to stand beside me on the terrace of the beautiful stately home, overlooking the gardens of the hotel, and we both watch the sun sinking lower in the sky, an orange ball of fire. Happiness glows from his every pore. I shiver in my bridesmaid's dress. He takes off his grey jacket and puts it around my shoulders.

'Are you happy?' I ask.

He nods and looks serious. 'Shell?'

'Yeah?' I straighten his tie and the handkerchief sticking out of his top pocket.

His eyes slide to the doorway, to where George is watching us, looking stunning in her understated wedding gown. Her eyes meet his, then they both look at me. 'Thank you.'

She nods and mouths the same.

I smile and go inside to where Jamie is waiting, with our infant daughter in his arms, to dance with me.

‘Come on,’ I say to him, taking Katrina from him. She chuckles and smiles up at me. ‘Let’s get this party started.’

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