

My name is Marilyn, like Marilyn Monroe. I was left for dead at a bus stop on Christmas Eve. In the newspaper that Mum brought in, I was plain Jane again: a retard with mousy brown hair and big glasses. That picture was taken before I got to bleach my hair and choose my own clothes and be who I wanted.

In my locker in the day centre, I have a poster of Marilyn Monroe pinned up. The one in the white dress, where it's blowing up in the air and she's laughing. I chose it because I thought she looked nice and it made me smile every morning when I opened the locker and because I wanted to be like her: pretty and happy and normal.

I'm twenty-five years old and I have a learning disability. At the day centre, I'm in the singing group and do dancing and hair and make-up. My key worker is Sharon, who taught me how to do my washing and sort it into colours. I like sorting things into colours. Sharon's got lots of colours in her hair. She's nice and she's Billy's key worker too. Billy's hair is black. I wasn't attacked by Billy. Billy is my friend and he came to visit me in hospital with Sharon but I pretended to be asleep so no visitors were allowed in except Mum and the doctors and nurses. I don't know why I did that. Billy is my friend. But my head was hurting and all I wanted to do was hide, so I pulled the sheet over my head and screwed my hands into fists.

Mum is sitting next to my bed. I can smell her perfume. It's called Charlie Red and it comes in a red bottle. I don't like it much but it's better than the other smells here. You can smell bleach. Mum uses lots of bleach to keep things clean and hygienic. It's very important to keep things clean and hygienic. But you can still smell the smells of people being ill, like if you are sick in a bucket next to your bed and no-one takes it away and it stinks. You can smell food as well but it's

not a nice smell to make you hungry. It's like leftovers or the bin.

I don't think I've been here very long but more than a day. I'm not very good at the time, so I don't know. If you put your dinner in the oven at the start of Coronation Street, it will be ready at the end. That's what Sharon taught me. You can use sand timers if you get confused with numbers. Or you can do two things at the same time, like putting your washing in the washing machine on a short wash and a boil-in-the-bag in a pan of water. When the washing finishes, the food is cooked. Everything is different here, so I get confused. The nurses wake you up really early and people bring food on trays when you're not even hungry. But maybe I have been here for a long time because I just remembered that I wasn't allowed any food first of all. Mum said they had to feed me through a tube, like a hosepipe but smaller. They don't put real food down it but a special liquid with something called nutrients.

'My poor baby. My poor baby Jane.' Mum strokes my forehead but I keep my eyes shut tight.

When I was twenty, I decided I wanted to be called Marilyn, like Marilyn Monroe. She used to be called Norma Jeane but she changed it to Marilyn when she was twenty because that was the start of her new life and she could forget about all the bad things that had happened before. That's what I wanted too. Rose, my social worker, said it was up to me. Rose says that I am an adult and I can make my own choices.

Mum didn't like my new name but she got used to it because I wouldn't answer to Jane any more. When I was twenty-one, Rose got me a flat in Cranley Crescent in Southend. It's near the beach and the shops and it's very nice. Natasha came every day to help me learn how to do things myself. Now she just comes twice a week. It was best for me and best for Mum because we were shouting at each other a lot then. But she doesn't want me to go back to Southend.

She wants me to stay with her in Dagenham.

‘My poor little Jane.’

I want to go home soon and go to sleep in my own bed. In my own flat. My bed is lovely and soft with three pillows. I have four sets of bed clothes that I bought with Natasha. They are four different colours - pink, peach, lilac and cream. I change them every week. The colours help me to remember.

Mum strokes my forehead but I keep my eyes shut tight. Mum says when I get better she’s going to take me home and look after me. She says it was a mistake letting me live in Cranley Crescent with those liberals. It should never have been allowed. A terrible mistake. She says she doesn’t know if she’ll be able to cope with me at home, though. She’ll have to see how it goes. I could always move into a nice little nursing home like Mrs. Tulser from number forty-five, where they have experienced nurses to look after you twenty-four hours a day and not let you out of their sight so you can’t get into trouble. She says it would be safe. It might be for the best.

She keeps on stroking and talking but I keep my eyes shut tight. Then the nurse comes in and tells Mum I need sleep and Mum kisses me on the head and I keep my eyes shut tight.

At the beginning, there were two of me. That’s what Mum told me once a long time ago when she was crying. I haven’t forgotten but I think I’m supposed to have. She said it was called twins. Two people who are the same. Sometimes they wear the same clothes and have the same hair in pigtails, like Emma and Sally who used to live in our road when I was little but moved away when they were ten. Sometimes twins are two girls or two boys but sometimes they are a boy and a girl, which doesn’t make sense because a boy and a girl are not the same.

But the other one of me died when she was coming out of Mum’s body, so she didn’t get a name and we’re not supposed

to talk about her. There's a thing like a rope that joins the baby to the mum and sometimes things go wrong and it gets twisted and that can be dangerous. It was dangerous when we were born because one of us died and I nearly got strangled with the rope. They think that's why I'm the way I am. When you get strangled by a rope, your brain gets starved of oxygen. It needs oxygen like you need to breathe oxygen in the air and if it gets starved of oxygen, it might stop working properly. This is what happened to me.

Mostly my brain works okay. There are people a lot worse off than me. Mum told me that too. Some people can't even talk or move. Mum calls those people vegetables but Sharon says that's not a very nice thing to say because they are still people and have feelings even if they can't talk or move. Sharon says that they can still communicate and show their feelings by blinking an eye or something but it sounds very hard to me. Some people can't talk properly with words but they can still talk with noises and move around, like John and Susan at the day centre.

John and Susan live in a home like the one Mum was talking about. A home where you just have a room like a hospital and nurses look after you. There are homes for people like John and Susan who can't talk or do things for themselves and there are homes for old people like Mrs. Tulser. I do not want to live in a home. I have my own home in Cranley Crescent. It's a flat with its own bathroom with a blue bath and kitchen with a microwave and Natasha comes to visit me and help me but no-one has to live there with me. Mum is cross with Natasha. She says that Natasha didn't look after me properly and that's why I got attacked. I like Cranley Crescent because I know all the people who live in the flats there - Penny and Gillian, Billy, Nigel, Frank and Joan and Paul.

Sometimes I think about the other one of me. Sometimes I talk to her in my head. I call her Janey because she is the other one of me, who didn't get to change her name and start

again. She didn't even get one name but I've got two. I might sing her a song. I might sing her a lullaby when I'm going to sleep. In your head, you can sing loud and no-one knows. It won't stop anyone else going to sleep. You can say anything you want. You can swear and shout and say bad things but if you say them out loud, you can get into trouble.

If she hadn't died, what would she be like? She would be like me but she might be worse off than me if the rope strangled her more because maybe her brain would work less. If you had a twin, you'd never be on your own. If you're on your own all the time, it can be very lonely but if you're with people all the time, it can make you cross. You might argue about noise and television and mess and sharing the bathroom. If I lived in a home like John and Susan, I would never have quiet time. I like to have quiet time, when you can think.

It must be very strange to meet yourself. Like looking in a mirror. I haven't looked in a mirror since I came in here because I'm scared to. I must look bad because Mum cried when she saw me. I don't think she's stopped crying since it happened.

Marilyn Monroe never had a baby. She had a husband but they got divorced. His name was Jimmy and she married him when she was sixteen. After Jimmy, she got married again. I would like to have a husband and a baby. It must be nice to have someone to love and to love you back. If I had a baby, I would love it and never give it away. I would never give it to someone else to take care of. People say I can't even look after myself, let alone a baby but that's not true. I would feed it and change it and give it a bath and wind it and sing it lullabies, like I sing to Janey. I'm good at singing.

When I was born, Mum was scared because of what the doctors told her. She didn't know how I'd turn out. She didn't know if she could cope with me. So she gave me to her sister, Maggie who lived in Southend. Aunt Maggie couldn't have children because her body didn't work properly. Maybe that's why she didn't mind that I didn't work properly either.

Aunt Maggie didn't even have a husband because he left before she got me but it didn't matter. I don't remember her that much but she must have loved me and I loved her. She died when I was four. Someone crashed into her car when she was driving home from the supermarket. I was strapped in the back. They say it's a miracle that I was okay. I don't remember it but I don't like cars. I always get the bus. But maybe now I don't like buses either because of what happened at the bus stop but I don't want to think about that.

After Mum's gone, I ask the nurse if I can look in the mirror. She has blonde hair like me but she doesn't have roots. Her hair is clean and shiny and she wears it in a pony tail. She says I have to talk to someone first. A man comes to talk to me. He's wearing a white coat and he has grey hair on his head and his eyebrows so he must be a doctor. He says my face looks a lot worse than it is. He says I might have scars, though. Do I know what scars mean? I do know what

scars mean because I have a long thin one on my leg where I burnt myself when Barbara was my mum. I nod to show him that I do know.

He says they might be able to do something about the scars later but they want to see how it heals first. I understand because sometimes things look bad but then they look okay after. Like when Billy cut his finger at the day centre doing cooking and it looked like all the blood in his body was coming out of his finger and he screamed and then I screamed and even Sharon looked scared. But when he took the plaster off the next day, it was only a tiny cut and his finger had gone all crinkly.

Billy is a nice man. He is my friend. The nurse told me that he's come to visit again and this time I let him and Sharon in. Mum has gone home to get some rest but she'll be back. I watch the nurse talking to Billy and Sharon outside my room. I have my own room, not a bed on the ward. I look through my window. It is getting dark outside but I don't know what time it is. They haven't brought any food for a long time.

The door opens and Sharon comes in first. She swallows hard.

'How are you feeling, Marilyn?' She speaks in a very quiet voice.

Billy makes a noise like a horse and starts rocking. Billy is a rocking horse.

'Oh, I guess you must be pleased to see us?'

I'm laughing at the rocking horse joke. It makes my face hurt.

'My face hurts,' I say and I start to cry. The tears sting and make it hurt worse.

'Oh, oh. Shall I get the nurse?' asks Sharon.

'No,' I shout. 'I don't want the nurse.'

'Okay,' says Sharon. 'Billy, come and say hello to Marilyn.'

Billy is facing the wall. He is still rocking. He is crying too. I know it is because I look very bad and he is scared. I want

him to stop being scared.

‘It’s alright, Billy,’ I say. ‘Come and sit down.’

He is still making the noise but it is quieter now and he turns round.

‘Come on, Billy,’ says Sharon, patting a chair.

Billy steps forward, then back again, then forward and he sits on the chair. He stares at me. I look at his face. It is all puffy. His eyes are very wet and there are lots of red lines in them. But they are not as bad as mine. We look at each other’s eyes. Billy is quiet. He blinks but doesn’t say anything. I wonder if the blinks mean anything. He looks at my forehead, my nose, my cheek, my mouth, my chin. He looks away.

I start to cry.

He looks at the tubes coming out of my arm. He looks at the machines that make whirring sounds. He looks at the flowers that Mum brought in. Red roses. Like a man might buy you for Valentines’ Day, if he loves you. He looks at the newspaper next to the vase on the bedside table. The one with the picture of plain Jane inside.

He puts his hand on my hand.

It is quiet.

‘So how are you feeling?’ asks Sharon.

Bad. I am feeling bad.

I say, ‘I want to go home,’

Billy looks up at me again. Then he looks at Sharon.

‘Can Marilyn go home?’ he asks her.

‘I don’t know,’ says Sharon. ‘What did the doctors say?’

I shrug.

‘They said there might be scars. I don’t care. I can put make-up on them.’

‘Have you spoken to your mum about going home?’

I pull my hand away from Billy and hit the bed. It makes him jump.

‘I want to go home to my flat!’ I can hear that my voice is loud.

‘Okay,’ says Sharon and I think this means I can go home. Then she says, ‘Have you spoken to Rose about it?’

I shake my head.

‘What about Natasha?’

‘No!’ I don’t mean to shout but it comes out very loud and the nurse opens the door. She is small and she has red spiky hair and lots of gold earrings in each ear. I don’t remember her. Where is the nurse with the silky blonde ponytail?

‘I think Jane’s had enough for now,’ she says. ‘Maybe you can come back tomorrow.’

I want to tell the nurse with the red hair that my name is Marilyn not Jane.

But I don’t.