

The Little Book of Nothing

So Elise sits down every night at six to work on her novel, *Death in the Trees*, but can't concentrate, because across the room her partner Raymond shouts abuse at a football match taking place on his laptop. One millionaire hasn't blocked another millionaire, and Raymond knows, with his sixth sense for knowing where the football should be at each precise moment to generate goals, that these men are plonkers, and if he were in charge, there wouldn't be such incompetence, and the team would score one million goals in the first two minutes. Elise can't get past the third sentence because she knows, as sure as she knows she doesn't love Raymond—or any man or anything on God's generally quite pointless earth—that her book is a waste of time, and she should give it up, because honestly, what's the point in her writing a book, when so many people with talent and brains across the globe are presently engaged in serious, important work, and she, a waitress, an art school dropout, is one of the hopeless masses, keying words onto blank screens in the hope someone might connect to one of her ordered squiggles, her long and winding paragraphs, her long asthmatic paragraphs, with endless commas, commas that lead nowhere, that go on and on, and on.

Elise is privy to a secret shared by those who spend their lives in rooms making words appear on pages: writing is the most horrendous thing a person can do, short of attaching electrodes to their nipples, in public, naked, while dogs chew the stumps of their dead frazzled legs, in the rain, in the snow, in the burning flames of hell, in Swindon. She knows, like every other writer, the pleasureless graft of putting words to white, clicking words to oblivion, changing words to other words, to make them better than other writers' words, so that one day, someone sitting on a sofa is stimulated enough to want to keep looking at your words, to crinkle their lips in a smile of recognition, to laugh at a corny pun, or, at best, to get through a sentence and huff out a 'meh' before tossing them aside, forever. This is the dream. One day, to have your words sitting on shelves, in discount bins, in warehouses, your words travelling the world, being read by students, Conservatives, the bored, the sad, the lonely, the insane. To be read, but never heard. To be heard, but never read. *The Dream*.

Raymond, like all devoted and loving partners of writers, thinks Elise is wasting her time and isn't going to earn any serious money sitting before a

laptop all night sweating out sentences, that she should give up *The Dream* and fill her uterus with babies. Elise, like all writers, doesn't listen to her partner, or to anyone who criticises her vocation, knowing if she did, she couldn't bring herself to put her clothes on in the morning. To throw shirts around her shoulders and feed her arms through the holes and do up the buttons. Sitting at that laptop at six every night is more important to her than earning money or eating food or being in love or chasing happiness or taking in oxygen. It's not something she, or anyone, even those writers she hears saying they love to write and can squeeze in 3000 words before work, who raise families and smile all the fucking time, can explain. All she knows is she's a writer, and she wants to kill herself.

Elise leads a life in search of a plot. Her novel is stuffed with them. Catherine, the heroine, spends her time moping around a village looking at trees and taking ludicrous amounts of methadone. She talks in depth about the trees because Elise feels that will lend her book more intellectual curiosity. She uses elaborate nature metaphors that evoke the bleak beauty of Thomas Hardy, because Elise thinks all writing must reflect or reference other writing to pitch its tent in the camp of capital L literature. She does odd things like licking the trees or taking her pants off and wrapping them around twigs because Elise doesn't have the guts to write about someone normal. She doesn't hide her depression through forced smiles and stoic mannerisms, because Elise does, and can't bring herself to write about herself because if she does, she doesn't know what will come out, what solipsistic drivel she will toss onto the page and stare at with her tongue hanging out, paralysed by feeling.

Desmond, the hero, looks out the window and smiles at Catherine draping her pants across twigs, knowing he is to blame for her unhappiness, that he will have dominion over this damaged little girl for so long as he chooses, so long as she keeps taking her methadone, so long as she crawls up to him in bed each night, clinging to his arms in case life should rise up and swallow her. Desmond knows Catherine is afraid of living, is afraid that destiny is cruel, that life will never improve, that she will be stuck here in her big blue pants with Raymond, still on the first page, eating biscuits and drinking coffee as she brings her trembling hands to the keys in the hope of being less alone, in the hope of filling a silence that can never be answered by the voices buzzing around her, sounds that say everything but express nothing. As hard as she tries, Desmond becomes Raymond, and the two worlds are inseparable, how she chooses to behave, to be with Raymond, informed by the neurosis of her invented self, closer and closer to the woman who hugs trees and sheds her pants in spontaneous fits.

Elise is going insane. She is almost thirty and has nothing to show for three decades of existence apart from a clichéd boyfriend and a career skirling further along the ice floe into oblivion. If she doesn't get a novel published this year, this month, this week, she will go on a rampage in the town, pulling the heads of babies and puking down their necks, lobbing grenades at those stucco-fronted homes where her friends now live with their sprats and their £30K salaries and their profitable ambitions, peeling the smugness off their faces in strips until she reigns supreme as The Published Author. If Elise doesn't reach the bestseller list with her miserable book, her miserable worthless book, her *little book of nothing*, she will take four hundred paracetamol and drink a carton of lighter fluid and fling herself under a train. Elise is not her heroine. She *is* her heroine, really, but she is not her heroine, if someone asks. Someone like Raymond, who asks: is she based on you? No, she is not me, she *is* me, but she is *definitely not* me. Shut up.

Elise is disgusted with the human body. Whenever Raymond takes off his clothes and stands before her, she cringes at his sandbags of pectoral sag and wants to tunnel through the bed to live with the voles, the other bestselling voles, chinking their glasses and accurately quoting Gore Vidal. She used to look upon his legs as two seabed stanchions, support beams to cling to in bed, their legs two pairs of scissors snipping darkness from the world, a perfect cut-out of modern love. Now she can't stand that *thing*—that scallop with salty sacs—and can't bring herself to take it inside her, because she too repulses herself. It's like her skin is being slowly attracted to a magnet in her feet. Her breasts don't jounce. Her legs don't hum. Her vagina looks like Tesco value chicken portions, with extra Ruskoline and tripe. It used to be she could come so hard she'd see stars. Now she can orgasm and thread a needle at the same time. If she doesn't do something about her life soon she'll . . . have to come up with something to do about her life. Soon.

Her prose fails because she wants to be Jeanette Winterson. Or Anaïs Nin. Or Doris Lessing. She can't make up her mind. So she uses torturous metaphors about trees. The trees, spindly hanks of madness, upshoots of lunacy as she shrieks, shrieks, shrieks in the park, her knickers around her ankles as she pisses on her legs, lipstick smeared across her cheeks, running towards children, rubbing their heads into her crotch, fucking up against the bark, rubbing her wet cunt against the bark until it bleeds, licking blood off the twigs, fucking kids in the ass. She doesn't know where to stop because she is half-deranged, she doesn't know where this comes from, this endless slew of arboreal porn and slapstick paedophilia.

Sometimes she goes into the bathroom, paints her lips red, paints her face red, a clown in redface, the red of menstrual blood, of a woman whose soul is haemorrhaging. She reads her work back and laughs out loud whenever Catherine, not her, rapes a child in the ass, sticking it to some little blonde bitch with a pearl-studded dildo, sticking it hard until her cunt splits open *hahahahahahaha* . . . then she goes to vomit in the bathroom.

It is a story of madness. Or possibly child abuse. Or possibly tree abuse. Or about the subjugation of women. Or about one woman going insane because she has unrealistic expectations and has grown to hate herself so much she doesn't feel like herself anymore. She is becoming Catherine. She has become vengeance. The day will come when she truly does not care any longer—an exile from herself, a stranger in a strange body.

The day comes when she truly does not care any longer. It happens over breakfast, over a bowl of Frosties, a disgusting bowl of Frosties. She tastes the sugar on her tongue and feels sick, sick with sweetness. All she wants to do is tear off her clothes and eat babies and fuck trees. She sits on the sofa all afternoon and dribbles, ignoring the phone, staring at inert pixels on the TV, faking their words, lying to her face: stupid airbrushed liars. She picks up her laptop and the words stream out of her, she writes:

Hello world, this is me, Elise, this is me, not some fake bitch with bigger brains and better prose, this is the real me, here I am, I am here, and I cannot stand myself, I cannot stand to look at myself. My whole world is tied to this useless desire to write, to make people care about this disaffected drivel I put on the page, and I don't even know what I'm doing it for. That's a lie: I do. I want people to read me and understand me, to understand what it feels like to be me, what it feels like to be so alone inside, what it feels like to get so low, you can't bring yourself to eat properly, to make conversation, to live. I know that's a tall order. Why should anyone care about me, about my stupid life? Well, they shouldn't. But that's all we do as writers. We want to draw people nearer in the hope they understand how awful it feels to be a writer attempting to write about life, how much more painful it is to write than it is to live. So this book means nothing. It is my little book of nothing.

She sits and writes this drivel for the whole afternoon. When Raymond comes home, she goes to the library to write in peace. When the library closes, she goes to an all-night café and lets it pour from her, reams of useless self-confession, apologies for herself and her horrible words. Exhausted, she goes home, prints her manuscript and sighs. She puts it

into a padded A4 envelope and writes on the front PO BOX NOWHERE. She leaves no returning address. She walks to the postbox, pushes it through the slot. Back home, she deletes her one copy of the manuscript, clears the recycle bin. She opens a new Word document to confirm what she suspects. Yes—it's over. She will never write another word again. She will never stare at a blank page wanting to slash her wrists. She will never again be tethered to the page, never again feel the life draining from her. She feels free, free to live and love again, free to live a clichéd life.

Her life begins again. She gets up at a clichéd 8 o'clock and eats a clichéd bowl of cereal and has a clichéd talk with Raymond, her clichéd boyfriend. She conducts the ordinary day with the most extraordinary passion she can, serving coffees and teas with the biggest widest smile her face can contain, laughing hysterically at each banal observation made by Dim Jenny. In the evening she prepares the most flavoursome and delicious boil-in-the-bag dinner for two and savours each spoonful, licking her fork clean as though the slurry gravy were golden caviar from God's bistro. She makes passionate love to Raymond, beautiful and perfect Raymond, the beautiful and perfect man, with his delicious body, rolling her tongue around his humming folds, driving herself to fits of ecstasy, harder and harder, until she passes out from ordinary happiness. She will never write another word again. She is the happiest woman alive.