

SINS & SCIENCE

NATASHA TREMBLAY

SAMPLE

CONTENT WARNING: Suicide

Dalton McGovern could no longer bear the weight of it all. Everyone around him expected nothing short of excellence from him. Having the greatest scientific mind of a generation, however, is of little significance without the strength of character one needs to overcome adversity. And at the age of twenty-eight, the Oxford-educated computer scientist was now taking more of an interest in biology. Indeed, sitting on the kitchen floor of his Liverpool flat, he evaluated that a quick, clean cut, half an inch deep, into his forearm, down to his wrist, would do the trick. The greatest challenge would be to overcome the pain after the first incision and repeat the operation on the other arm. Best to start with his left arm then, as he was left-handed. He deemed he would have a greater chance of succeeding using his dominant hand, despite the injury.

For the past three years, Dalton had felt trapped in a fog of emptiness. Everywhere he went, no matter who he saw, or what he did, he simply felt nothing. When Karl left him, he felt no heartbreak. When he completed his doctorate, he felt no joy. When

his mother passed, he felt no sadness. Everything moved in slow motion around him, as though he were disconnected from the real world and caught in a void of apathy. Today, he would finally put an end to his lonesome torment.

Without getting up from the floor, he reached up toward the kitchen counter, where weeks' worth of dirty dishes was piled. He grabbed a steak knife and pointed it to his arm. For a moment, he hesitated. *You're pathetic. Can't even end your miserable existence,* he thought. *Stop thinking. You always think and never get anything done. For once in your life, fucking do something.*

And Dalton successfully plunged the knife into his arm. It took a split second before he felt pain. The wound was deep, and blood began to pour out as though it were hardly contained inside him to begin with. When the pain hit, Dalton's first instinct was to pull the knife out. But he stayed in control. *Mind over matter. The worst is done. Now, just slide it down to your wrist. Fucking do it already!* Dalton forced the blade down to his wrist, which was harder than he'd imagined. He groaned and forced the knife through the skin, flesh and nerves that stood between him and his objective. An abundance of blood now flowed out of his arm, dripping all over his body and legs, and pouring onto the floor. He watched as his blood travelled between the cracks of the grey tiles, the stream being guided in a contained and orderly fashion as it spread across the kitchen floor. That pleased him.

With great difficulty, he grasped the knife with his left hand to repeat the operation on his right arm. The awful burning sensation that radiated from his wound throughout his entire body was very nearly enough for him to give up. *Fuck the pain. You want it to stop? It will stop once you've finished what you started.* Dalton channeled the energy the pain generated into his left hand, and, in a far less calculated manner than he had with the initial wound, he madly slashed at his right arm over and over until enough blood sprayed and poured out for him to consider the wound sufficiently severe to achieve his goal.

The burn Dalton felt in his arms gave him some final satisfaction before his imminent death. It was the first time in years he had felt something so vividly. At last, he felt real. He felt very much alive, with death just around the corner. And then he felt nothing.

Only darkness and eternal solitude.

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Darcy McGovern liked to consider herself a little bit psychic. This trait of hers was particularly strong when it came to her twin brother. All day, she had been overwhelmed with a terribly empty feeling, as though she were trapped in a void of hopeless despair. It was certainly out of character. Darcy always balanced out her gloomy brother with her cheerful personality. Today, however, she *just knew* something terrible was bound to happen. That feeling led her down Glendevon Road until she reached Dalton's terrace home, where she'd been standing outside the door for about a minute, knocking.

"If you don't open up, I'm coming in anyways. I've still got Karl's old key, you know." No answer. In addition to her concern for her brother's well-being, the wind was blowing hard that day and it was bound to rain soon, and Darcy failed to see why she should stand outside any longer. She wiped her feet on the rude welcome mat that she had bought him for their last birthday, staining the words *No need to linger* with the dirt from her shoes. She pushed open the wooden door and the hinges screeched.

A cool draft from the kitchen brought with it a metallic scent all too familiar to Darcy, combined with the stench of rotting food abandoned on the counter. She rushed to the kitchen. On the kitchen floor lay her twin brother, in a pool of his own blood.

"Now, what have you got yourself into this time?" she asked the motionless body. Steady as always, she called for an ambulance, and began to dress his wounds with what she could find—a dishrag, that she soaked in gin. In Afghanistan, Darcy had seen even more rudimentary treatments do the trick. He had lost a lot of blood, but he could still survive. "We all die at some point, but there's no need to rush into it," she advised her unconscious twin.

The ambulance arrived and took Dalton away. Darcy told the uninterested paramedics, "I know he's still with us somewhere. I can *feel* it. I'm a bit psychic, you know."

Indeed, what was left of Dalton's consciousness grasped at the last thread of existence on which it could cling. Like butter spread too thin on a slice of bread, Dalton felt himself slowly fading away.

And then, he woke up.

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It is difficult to say whether being a loss adjuster makes a person cynical, or if cynical people are simply drawn to such an occupation. Regardless, Isidora Prentice's belief that people, by nature, were fundamentally self-serving and dishonest, made her very good at her job. On that grey Tuesday afternoon, Isidora walked around a burned-down bed and breakfast and was treated to a private theatrical performance starring the owner of the ashly inn. He was seated on the pavement with his feet stretched out onto Bagot street, elbows on knees, head in hands. Isidora pretended to ignore him as she examined the damage within the scorched establishment. However, she found herself entertained by his dramatic monologue.

"My lifelong dream has vanished into ash and flames!" he cried. "Why must God punish me so ruthlessly? I am a good man. A good man, I tell you!"

She couldn't help but join in. "I don't believe God is to blame," said Isidora as she pushed aside some ash from the ground with her foot, hands in the pockets of her red jacket. She looked down, and a thick lock of her blonde hair fell in front of her pale blue eyes. The temperature hovered just above freezing, so she hesitated a moment before taking her ungloved hand out of the warmth of her pocket to pull the stray lock back behind her ear. With her foot, she uncovered a charred object about half an inch wide and a couple inches long. She leaned down and picked it up, flicking the ash off it with her finger and uncovering its metallic top.

"Do you smoke, sir?" The object, though melted and misshapen, was visibly a cigarette lighter.

"Are you offerin' me a ciggy or are you accusin' me of something? I know why you're here and what your type do to honest men like me." The owner stood up and joined Isidora inside the remains of the inn. He hovered behind her, looking over her shoulder at the cigarette lighter.

Isidora's gaze turned from the lighter, towards the owner. "I smoke," she said, a half-smile playing on her lips. She pulled a cigarette from a pack in her pocket, placed it in her mouth, flicked

the lighter and managed to get a few sparks out of it. The fourth spark was enough to light her cigarette. "Still works."

She looked back at the spot on the ash-covered floor where she'd found the lighter. Just above was a window frame. *Large window, large, flammable curtains*, she thought. *What a dull way to start a fire. He could have at least gone for something a little more explosive!* She looked back at the floor where a few singed fragments of the curtain material lay. She picked up a piece and held it up between her thumb and her index finger at the owner's eye-level. She took the cigarette out of her mouth with her other hand and held it to the material until it ignited. The owner watched as the flame consumed the curtain, slowly.

"Business was going well then, was it?" asked Isidora, looking straight into his eyes. She didn't flinch or blink as the flame reached her finger. She blew it out and he blinked as the smoke stung his eyes.

She looked down. He was digging the nails of his left hand into the palm of his right. *Strange tic. The hands always betray the liar.* Her eyes shifted back up from his hands toward his eyes while she awaited a response.

The owner stuck to his story. "Yes, ma'am." His nails sank deeper into his palm.

"There are better things you could do with your retirement," said Isidora. "Especially with a nice sum from your insurer. I would go to Nice." The owner frowned and his breathing began to accelerate. *Well, he didn't last very long.*

"The bizzies ruled out arson. You're just trying to find a way out of giving what's due to an old man, you cheap bastards!"

"Who said anything about denying your claim?"

The owner's anger got the best of him. "I didn't light the curtains on fire! You're a con artist, and a fraud. You should be ashamed of yourself. How do you live with yourself, ruinin' people who've already lost everything?"

Isidora had little trouble living with herself. Exposing people for what they truly were was quite satisfying to her and getting paid to do so was certainly better than allowing this ability to plague her personal relationships. Determining she had all the information she needed, Isidora left the inn and flagged down a cab.

When it turned the corner to Sandown Road, Isidora swore

upon spotting her 10-year-old nephew Stanley Wexler pounding on her glass-paneled front door like an idiot. His bike, of course, was over on its side. *Will the boy ever figure out how to use his kickstand?* she wondered as she got out of the cab.

"Oy! Auntie Izzy! Lemme in! I'm hungry! Auntie Izzy!" Stanley shouted at closed door. She slammed the cab door shut, and Stanley spun around. The wide grin on his face revealed the many gaps between his teeth. He waved.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" asked Isidora. She marched over, inspected the door, discovering several of his greasy handprints on the glass. She took a tissue paper from her purse and began wiping the marks.

"Mum's working overtime again, so I came over," said Stanley as he watched his aunt polish the door.

"Of course she is. Of course you did. Of course she didn't bother texting me and just sent you over. It's not like a single woman in her twenties would have anything better to do, like go on a date. No, of course not. My social life amounts to babysitting me bloody sister's progeny," she said, turning to look him over. "And of course you didn't tie your bloody shoes."

"It's too much trouble, tyin' me shoes just to take 'em off again," said Stanley. Isidora opened the door. He pushed past her, stepped inside, kicked off his sneakers and darted to the kitchen. He sat down at the table. "I'm hungry."

Isidora nearly tripped on one of his shoes as she walked down the hallway toward the kitchen. She microwaved some leftover spaghetti and served it as dinner at the kitchen table, accompanied by some boxed wine for herself.

Stanley picked a dusty silk flower from an arrangement in a vase in the center of her table, a remnant of a bridesmaid bouquet from five years ago. Isidora kept them on the table because they amused her; the flowers had lasted longer than the marriage. Stanley held the flower under his nose, took a deep whiff, quickly pulled away from it and tossed it on the floor.

"These flowers are no good. They don't smell nice. Ma grows real zinnias, the nicest in the neighborhood."

"Of course she does."

"I will bring you some when they bloom."

Isidora shrugged and poured herself a generous glass of wine.

“So, Stanley, tell me about school.”

“Good,” he replied politely.

“Why?”

Stanley wasn't expecting to have to justify his answer. “Well, I've got loads of friends. I'm the fastest runner.”

Isidora frowned slightly. “Friends and running hardly relate to school itself. When you're sitting in the classroom, how do you feel?”

Stanley had not thought of it before. But he tried. “Pretty bored, really. And I have to sit next to a nasty girl, Chloe. She thinks she knows everythin', answerin' all the questions.”

Isidora considered her nephew's complaints. “Yes, right. After all, the fastest runner in school can't be bested by the girl he fancies... especially when she doesn't return his feelings.”

“Fuck off! Ma says you drink too much and that everyone hates you. She says you'll never marry and that you'll die alone, miserable, and you'll rot in Hell, just like me great-aunt Sylvia! And I won't bring you any zinnias, not even to put on your grave.”

He stormed out the front door and grabbed his bike. Isidora figured she should probably try and stop him, or at the very least, figure out where he was headed, but considering his poor manners and her sister's alleged opinion of her, she didn't particularly feel like doing anything more for them. She'd already shared what was supposed to be her dinner for the rest of the week.

Sitting alone at her kitchen table, Isidora lit a cigarette and poured herself more wine. *Am I really going to die alone and go to Hell?* She fell asleep at the table, the now empty wine box pillowing her head.

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“Enjoyed yer nap?” asked Darcy, who was sitting next to her brother's bed eating hospital pudding. She offered him a spoonful. “It's butterscotch.” He groaned and shook his head in response. He'd only just woken up from his suicide attempt. Nearly dying had cut his appetite.

The hospital lights were far too bright and his sister's voice far too loud. Although he felt light-headed, he attempted to sit up slightly. He looked at his sister, whose large grey eyes still had their

humorous glow. She had French-braided her shoulder-length, dark-brown hair. He knew she always braided her hair in difficult times. With her hair out of the way, she had one less thing to worry about.

"You lost a lot of blood, which meant *I* had to lose a lot of blood, which also means I get to have some pudding," Darcy said. "Since that's my blood in your veins now, you can't just do whatever you want with it. It's mine, and I'm telling you, you have to take good care of it. No more nasty cuts," she said, pointing her spoon at his bandaged forearms as she spoke those last four words. She finished her pudding.

"I saw death," Dalton said, his voice faint.

Darcy raised her eyebrows. "And? How was it?"

"It was nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing. Just darkness, and loneliness, for all eternity."

Darcy nodded. "Happy to hear it's shit. That means you won't be in a rush to go back."

Dalton sat up quickly, which made him feel even more woozy. The rapid movement also made him aware that his arms hurt.

"Easy, now!" said Darcy.

"That's it!" said Dalton. "My next project. I've got it!"

Darcy's eyes widened.

He continued, "I was out of ideas. Uninspired. Purposeless. Destined to giving lectures to uninterested half-wits."

Darcy's skepticism showed through clearly as she listened to her brother's delusions. "You're on lots of meds, love." Her remark didn't tone down his enthusiasm.

"What if I could create the afterlife?" he said.

Darcy burst into laughter. She always found her brother's God complex as amusing as it was problematic.

"Just get some rest."

Dalton lay back and shut his eyes. Obviously, his stupid sister would never understand his abilities. But as he rested, he brainstormed the answer to life's greatest mystery.

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Dalton's recovery progressed well. He was to be released from the hospital in a matter of minutes, now. After being harassed by

psychiatrists for days, he finally accepted a prescription for antidepressants he knew he wouldn't need. It seemed a waste to have to throw so much medication down the toilet. But, he couldn't let serotonin reuptake inhibitors interfere with his mind, not when he had to work on the most important scientific achievement in the history of mankind. He waited for Darcy to come pick him up. Instead, his ex-boyfriend, Karl Schmidt, showed up.

"What the bloody fuck?" asked Dalton.

Karl smiled gently and said, "Darcy told me you were not feeling very well, and I wanted to check on you."

Dalton glared at him. "Your English is as shit as ever."

Attacking Karl's slight German accent was rather uncalled for. However, Karl did leave him abruptly without any explanation, so a bit of hostility was to be expected.

Karl ignored the attack and offered to drive Dalton home. He had already told Darcy he would be doing so, which left Dalton no choice but to go along with it. As Karl drove, Dalton kept his arms crossed and stared out the window of Karl's Volkswagen Golf. Dalton really wanted to give him the silent treatment, but he had a lot of questions and he felt the silent treatment may have been punishing him more than Karl, who seemed quite at peace keeping his eyes on the road.

"Where were you all this time?" asked Dalton, with only a slight hint of bitterness in his tone. He looked at Karl, who was surprisingly tanned. He had new glasses, too. They were round, with a thick, burgundy frame. Dalton found they detracted from his hazel eyes. He had let his black hair grow out a bit, which gave him a new devil-may-care look that Dalton admittedly found quite attractive. Of course, Karl was still astonishingly thin for a grown man, and he apparently still insisted on wearing jeans with a suit jacket. Today, the jeans were white, the jacket, grey. But something was different about him since the last time Dalton had seen him. He no longer seemed like the overworked young lawyer he had known. Karl was without a doubt far more relaxed.

"I was in Israel, for a while."

Dalton laughed. "Ironic."

Karl didn't get it and carried on with his story. "I then traveled to India, before going to Ghana. Finally, I came back to Europe and

spent some time in Marseille. Then your sister called me.”

Little did Dalton know, Karl had a total burnout after being overworked as a young corporate lawyer in a large firm specializing in insurance law and went on a quest for spiritual enlightenment. He hoped to find it in Jerusalem, but only found boredom upon seeing historical monuments. He hoped to find it in Kashmir, but only found an allergy to ginger. He hoped to find it in Ghana, but only found out the hard way it was possible to get malaria despite getting the recommended immunization. Karl gave up on his spiritual quest, went to Marseille, and realized the negotiating skills he had developed as a lawyer, the French he had learned in school, and the friends he'd made travelling through the Middle East came together nicely. Indeed, Karl became a key player in illegal arms dealings between France and the Maghreb countries. However, he dropped it all when Darcy emailed him about Dalton's suicide attempt.

“Why did you go?” asked Dalton.

Karl paused. “I was looking for something I couldn't find.”

Dalton laughed. “You were avoiding your responsibilities, because you couldn't handle it anymore. You weren't looking for anything, you were running away.”

Karl took one hand off the wheel and gently touched Dalton's right arm, where several nasty scars had formed. “Just like you.”

Dalton watched Karl's index finger slowly trace a long stitch on his right arm. Dalton pulled his arm away. “Unlike you, I came back with answers.”

Karl parked the car. “If you'll allow me to come inside, I'd be very interested in hearing your answers, for I am full of questions.”

Dalton's pride was telling him to send Karl away, but he felt the urge to reveal to someone his solution to death. He invited Karl inside his home, which was now spotless, thanks to Darcy. Karl took the liberty of preparing some tea for the two of them.

“Oh, sure, make yourself at home again. Come and go as you please!”

Karl sat down and gave Dalton his cup. “Tell me about those answers of yours.”