

THE OTHER WIFE

M I C H A E L

R O B O T H A M



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2018
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

Published in Great Britain in 2018 by Sphere

Copyright © Bookwrite Pty 2018

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes
of private study, research, criticism or review permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*,
no part may be stored or reproduced by any process without prior written permission.
Enquiries should be made to the publisher.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 3793 3 (paperback)

Cover design by Luke Causby/Blue Cork
Cover photographs courtesy of Adobe Stock
Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Productions Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the
Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing
Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379.
FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial
and economically viable management of the world's forests.

For Ian Stevenson

‘Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.’

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Day One

1

From the top of Primrose Hill, silhouetted against the arriving day, the spires and domes of London look like the painted backdrop of a Pinewood sound stage waiting for actors to take their places and an unseen director to yell '*Action*'.

I love this city. Built upon the ruins of the past, every square foot of it has been used, re-used, flattened, bombed, dismantled, rebuilt and flattened again until the layers of history are like sediments of rock that one day will be picked over by future archaeologists and treasure hunters.

I am no different – a broken man, built upon the wreckage of my past. It has been thirteen years since I was diagnosed with Parkinson's. It began with an unconscious, random flicker of my fingers on my left hand; a ghost movement that looked like a twitch, but read like a guilty verdict. Unknown to me, working in secret, my body had begun a long, drawn-out separation from my mind; a divorce where nobody gets to keep the record collection or fights over who gets the dog.

That small rolling of the thumb and forefinger has now spread silently through my limbs until they no longer do my bidding without the assistance of drugs. When I'm medicated

properly, I can appear to be almost symptom-free. A little stooped and more deliberate in my movements but normal in most respects. At other times, Mr Parkinson is a cruel puppeteer, tugging at invisible strings, making me dance to music that only he can hear.

There is no cure – not yet – but I live in hope that science will win the race. In the meantime, daily exercise is recommended. That's why I'm standing here, with all of London's mangled and magnificent history on display. My eyes sweep from east to west and settle on the curved rooftops and netting of London Zoo. Julianne and I bought our first house a few streets from here. We would lie in bed on warm nights when the curtains swayed from open windows, listening to the calls of lions and hyenas and animals we couldn't name.

It is sixteen months since she died. A surgical complication, they said; a blood clot that travelled from her groin to her heart and lodged in her left ventricle. She lived for a week on life support, lying on white sheets, looking tranquil and beautiful, but 'not at home', according to the neurologist. We turned off the machines and she slipped away like an empty rowing boat cut loose in the current.

The seasons since then have been like stages of grieving. Summer passed in denial and isolation, autumn brought anger, winter blame and by spring my depression had driven me to seek help.

I endure for the sake of my daughters, Charlie and Emma, because they deserve more than tragedy as their template and so much of Julianne lives within them; from the parting of their hair, to the inflection in their voices and the way they walk, frown and laugh.

We moved back to London a year ago, after selling the cottage in Somerset. I used the money from the sale and a bank loan to buy a top-floor flat in a mansion block called Wellington Court in Belsize Park, not far from Primrose Hill. Airy and bright, with high ceilings and a large bay window in

the sitting room, it has three bedrooms and a small roof terrace, accessible from the kitchen window, where Emma and I sometimes watch the sun setting over London while sitting on deckchairs like passengers on an ocean liner.

Emma is twelve. I left her sleeping at the flat with an alarm set for school. No longer my little girl, she's on the cusp of womanhood, with green-grey eyes, curly hair and skin so pale it looks almost powdered like a kabuki dancer. In January she started at North Bridge House, an independent day school in North London with the sort of fees to make my eyes water. The scholarship came as a bonus and a surprise.

My eldest, Charlie, is in her second year at Oxford studying behavioural psychology. Parents are normally proud when children follow in their footsteps, but I take no pleasure in Charlie wanting to be a forensic psychologist, because I know where her fascination lies and how it started. She wants to understand why some people commit terrible acts and fantasise about even worse crimes; the psychopaths and sociopaths who haunt her nightmares.

Continuing down the hill, I cross the canal into Regent's Park. A young woman jogs past me, her buttocks hugged by Lycra and her ponytail bobbing on her back. I contemplate catching up with her. We could run together. Connect. I'm dreaming. She's gone.

I have an appointment this morning with Dr Victoria Naparstek at a café not far from her office in Harley Street. Victoria is a good-looking woman. Forty-something. Slim. Striking. I slept with her once when Julianne and I were separated. Victoria broke it off. When I asked her why, she said, 'You're still in love with your wife.' I asked her if that mattered. 'It does to me,' she replied.

She's waiting for me at a café in Portland Place. Dressed in an A-line skirt and matching jacket with a simple white blouse, open at the neck. She smiles and her dimples leave an impression on her cheeks.

‘Professor O’Loughlin.’

‘Dr Naparstek.’

‘You’re sweaty.’

‘See what you do to me.’

We banter. Flirt a little. A waitress has come to take our order. Tea. Coffee. Toast. Jam.

Everybody told me that I should talk to someone after Julianne’s death. I know the benefits of grief counselling, yet I fought against the idea until Victoria called me a ‘fucking idiot’ and a ‘typical man’ who shuts down and pretends the problem doesn’t exist.

‘You look good,’ she says.

‘I am.’

My first lie.

‘Have you been sleeping?’

‘Yes.’

Another one.

‘And the dreams?’

‘One or two.’

‘Always the same?’

I nod.

This is part of our routine. Therapy without being therapy. She will quiz me, I will answer, and neither of us will feel under any obligation to reveal confidences or offer advice.

Victoria wants me to verbalise my worst fears, but I don’t have to put them into words because I live them every day. I don’t have to imagine being alone, or having an illness, or suddenly bursting into tears over a broken cup, or a dropped egg.

‘How is Emma?’ she asks.

‘Good. Better. We spent yesterday painting her room and putting stencils on the walls.’

‘Did she mention Julianne?’

‘No.’

‘What about the photographs?’

‘She won’t look at them.’

Emma hasn’t cried or rebelled or asked questions about her mother’s death. She won’t visit Julianne’s grave, or look at photographs of her, or reminisce about the past. This isn’t about denial, or pretending nothing has changed. Emma knows that Julianne isn’t coming back, but refuses to labour the point, or have it define our existence.

Some nights, I’ve found her hiding in her wardrobe, curled in a ball.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I can’t sleep.’

‘That’s OK. Just rest your eyes.’

‘What if I never sleep again?’

‘You will.’

‘What if I’m the only one awake? The whole world will be sleeping and I’ll be on my own, in the dark . . . with nobody to help me.’

‘I’ll be here.’

‘Promise you won’t fall asleep until I do.’

‘I promise.’

Emma worries about me because I am the last parent standing. When we cross the street, she insists on holding my hand – not to protect herself, but to protect me. She makes sure that I eat well and exercise and take my medication. I wake sometimes to find her leaning over my bed with her hand on my chest. She counts the number of breaths. Three sets of nine. Twenty-seven. Usually, that’s enough to reassure her.

Our coffees have arrived. Victoria tears open a sachet of sugar and shakes the contents into the foam.

‘Did you ask Emma if she’d talk to me?’

‘She’s not sold on the idea.’

‘I understand.’

‘I don’t want to push her.’

‘You shouldn’t. Let her make the decision when she’s ready.’
I’ve given the same advice to countless grieving parents when

they've visited my consulting rooms, but when it comes to my own flesh and blood I begin to question my thirty years of clinical experience as a psychologist.

My mobile phone is vibrating on the table. I don't recognise the number.

'Is that Professor O'Loughlin?' asks a female voice.

'Yes.'

'This is the registrar at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington. Your father, William O'Loughlin, has been admitted with serious head injuries.'

'Head injuries.'

'He underwent surgery six hours ago.'

'Surgery.'

'To relieve pressure on his brain. He was bleeding internally. Right now he's in a medically induced coma.'

'Coma.'

Why am I repeating everything she says?

The café has a shelf of bonsai plants, miniature trees with gnarled trunks and moss-covered branches. I find myself staring at the shrunken forest, no longer listening to what the registrar is saying. My knees are shaking.

'Are you there, Professor?'

'Yes. Sorry. What was my father doing in London?'

What difference does it make?

'I don't have that information,' replies the registrar.

Of course she doesn't! It's a stupid question.

'Does my mother know?'

'She's with him now.'

'Can I talk to her?'

'We don't allow mobile phones in the ICU.'

'I see. Right. Tell her I'm coming.'

I end the call and stare at the blank screen. I should call my sisters. No, Mum will have done that. I should catch a cab. Emma is at home. I'm supposed to walk her to school and then I have patients to see. I can cancel my appointments.

Victoria searches for her wallet. 'You go. Call me later.'

Within moments I'm on the pavement, looking for a cab. Three of them pass. Occupied. I start jogging, desperately trying to lift my feet and swing my arms in sequence. Traffic is backed up along Euston Road. I cut across Regent's Park and up Primrose Hill. My lungs hurt and lactic acid is building up in my legs.

Having climbed the stairs at Wellington Court, I'm ready to collapse.

'Did you run all the way?' asks Emma, who is sitting at the kitchen bench, in her school uniform – a striped dress, red cardigan, black tights and buckled shoes.

'Granddad . . . in hospital . . . I have to go.'

'What happened?'

'Some sort of accident. I need a shower.'

'Is he going to be OK?'

'He's in good hands.'

Emma follows me down the hallway. 'Bad things happen at hospitals.'

'What do you mean?'

'People die.' Her lips are pulled down at the corners and her tea-coloured eyes are shining.

'Not always. Most of them get better,' I say, knowing that my words sound hollow to someone who has lost her mother.

'I don't want you to go,' she says.

'Nothing is going to happen to me.'

'At least let me come.'

'You have school.'

'Who's going to take me?'

'I'll talk to the boys.'

The boys are men – Duncan and Arturo – a gay couple who live on the floor below. One works in advertising and the other runs an art gallery in Islington. Having showered and changed, I knock on their door. Duncan answers. He's wearing a short gown just long enough to brush the top of his thighs.

‘Joseph,’ he says excitedly, kissing both my cheeks. I bend in the middle to avoid groin-to-groin contact.

‘My dad is in hospital. Can one of you take Emma to school?’

Duncan relays the message over his shoulder and Arturo replies, yelling from the kitchen. ‘I can take her on the back of my bike.’

I want to say no. Duncan does it for me. ‘You’re not taking her on the bike. You ride like a maniac.’

‘I did a safe-riding course.’

‘With Evel Knievel.’

I’ve triggered a domestic dispute. Duncan waves me away. ‘You go, I’ll walk her. I hope your father is all right.’

Minutes later I’m in a cab, stuck in traffic on Edgware Road, listening to the talkback callers complaining about Brexit, ‘fake news’, immigrants and low wages. I’ve grown tired of politics and current affairs. I don’t want to be informed by journalists or governed by politicians of any persuasion. Democracy has failed. Let’s try a benign dictatorship.

My father is in a coma. He turned eighty this year and I don’t remember him ever being in hospital – not as a patient. I long ago labelled him ‘God’s-Personal-Physician-in-Waiting’ because of his indefatigable energy and unrivalled self-belief. For more than fifty years he was a medical giant – a professor of surgery and public health; advisor to governments, founder of the International Trauma Research Unit, lecturer, author, commentator and philanthropist. Our family’s charitable trust – the O’Loughlin Foundation – gives millions of pounds in research grants each year.

I saw Dad two weeks ago. We had lunch at his club in Mayfair; a pleasant enough two hours in a tweedy, pass-the-port sort of way. I don’t remember what we spoke about. Nothing meaningful. He looked well. Happy. He spends most of his time at the farmhouse in Wales, but comes to London quite regularly for meetings and lectures.

The cab arrives at St Mary’s and I hurry past a cluster of

nurses and orderlies, smoking cigarettes on the pavement. The Major Trauma Ward is on the ninth floor. Waiting for the lift to arrive, I catch that hospital smell of antiseptic, floor polish and bodily fluids. Memories bubble up and scald my throat. Swallowing hard, I force them down, tasting the vomit.

I press a buzzer outside the ICU. A nursing sister answers, the heavy door sucking inwards like she's opening an airlock.

'My father is here. William O'Loughlin. My mother is with him.'

Her smile is encouraging. I wonder how long she's practised it.

'Please wash your hands,' she says, showing me to a sink with antibacterial soap and a paper towel dispenser. I follow her through a long dimly lit ward past rows of beds partitioned by machines and curtains. Each pool of light contains someone who is close to death, plugged in, taped up, filled and drained, hydrated and evacuated, medicated and sedated.

'He's the last cubicle,' says the nurse. 'Please don't try to wake him.'

I approach tentatively, catching my first glimpse of a broken man lying on a bed, imprisoned by tubing and cables. His head is heavily bandaged. An oxygen mask covers his mouth. IV bags hang above his head. Needles have been driven into his veins. Sensors are monitoring his vital signs.

I want to turn back and say, 'That's not my father. There's been a mistake,' but I know it's him.

A woman is sitting beside the bed, partially in shadow. She looks up as though startled, her eyes red-rimmed and bruised from lack of sleep.

Letting go of Dad's hand, she gets to her feet.

'It's Joseph, isn't it?'

I nod.

'I didn't want us to meet like this.'

'I don't understand. Where's my mother?'

'She's not here.'

‘But I was told . . .’

‘I asked the hospital to call you.’

‘I’m sorry, but who are you?’

‘I’m his other wife.’

PURCHASE A COPY OF

THE OTHER WIFE

by Michael Robotham

Paperback:

Dymocks

Booktopia

QED

Readings

eBook:

Amazon

GooglePlay

iBooks

Kobo

FIND YOUR LOCAL BOOKSELLER

FIND A BOOKSHOP

www.indies.com.au

PURCHASE THE AUDIO EDITION

AUDBLE