

Can I make one thing clear – no matter what you’ve heard, and I’m sure you’ve heard plenty – I’m not a full-blown Karma-Denier. It might exist, it might not, like how on earth would I know? All I’m doing is giving my version of events.

However, if Karma *does* exist, I’ll say one thing for it, it’s got a fantastic PR machine. We all know the ‘story’: Karma is running a great big ledger in the sky where every good deed done by every human being is recorded and at some later stage – the time to be of Karma’s choosing (Karma is cagey that way, plays its cards close to its chest) – Karma will refund that good deed. Maybe even with interest.

So we think if we sponsor youths to climb a hill to raise money for the local hospice, or if we change our niece’s nappy when we’d rather stab ourself in the head, that at some point in the future something good will happen to us. And when something good *does* happen to us, we go, Ah, that’ll be my old friend Karma, paying me back for my erstwhile good deed. ‘Hey, thanks, Karma!’

Karma has got a string of credits the length of the Amazon, when in fact I suspect Karma has been doing the conceptual version of lounging around on the couch in its underpants watching Sky Sports.

Let’s take a look at Karma ‘in action’.

One day, four and a half years ago, I was out driving in my

car (a cheapish Hyundai SUV). I was moving along in a steady stream of traffic and up ahead I saw a car trying to get out of a side road. A couple of things told me that this man had been trying to get out of this side road for quite a while. Fact A) the man was bent over his steering wheel in an attitude of weary, imploring frustration. Fact B) he was driving a Range Rover and simply by dint of the fact that he was driving a Range Rover, everyone was going to think, Ah, look at him there, the big, smug, Range Rover driver, I'm not letting him out.

So I thought, Ah, look at him there, the big, smug, Range Rover driver, I'm not letting him out. Then I thought – and all of this was happening quickly, because, like I said, I was moving along in a steady stream of traffic – then I thought, Ah, no, I'll let him out, it'll be – and mark me closely here – it'll be *good karma*.

So I slowed down, flashed my lights to indicate to the big, smug, Range Rover driver that he was free to go, and he gave a tired smile and started moving forward and already I was feeling a warm sort of glow and wondering vaguely what form of lovely cosmic payback I'd be getting, when the car behind, unprepared for me slowing down to let the Range Rover out – on account of it being a Range Rover – went ploughing into the back of me, shunting me forward with such force that I went careering into the side of the Range Rover (the technical term for such a manoeuvre is 'T-boning') and suddenly there was a three-car love-in going on. Except there was no love there, of course. Far from it.

For me, the whole thing happened in slow motion. From the second the car behind me began to concertina into mine, time almost stopped. I felt the wheels of my own car beneath me, moving without my say-so, and I was staring into the eyes of the man driving the Range Rover, our gazes locked in

horror, united in the strange intimacy of knowing we were about to hurt each other and being entirely powerless to prevent it.

Then came the awful reality as my car really did hit his – the sound of metal crunching and glass shattering and the bone-juddering violence of the impact . . .

. . . followed by stillness. Just for a second, but a second that lasted a very long time. Stunned and shocked, the man and I stared at each other. He was only inches away from me – the impact had shifted us so that our cars were almost side by side. His side window had shattered and small chunks of glass glittered in his hair, reflecting a silvery light that was the same colour as his eyes. He looked even more weary than when he was waiting to be let out of the side road.

Are you alive? I asked, with my thoughts.

Yes, he replied. *Are you?*

Yes.

My passenger door was wrenched open and the spell was broken. ‘Are you okay?’ someone asked. ‘Can you get out?’

With shaking limbs, I crawled my way across to the open door and when I was outside and leaning against a wall I saw that Range Rover Man was also free. With relief, I registered that he was standing upright, so his injuries, if any, must be minor.

Out of nowhere a small man hurtled at me and shrieked, ‘What the hell are you at? That’s a brand-new Range Rover!’ It was the driver from the third car, the one who’d caused the accident. ‘This is going to cost me a fortune. It’s a new car! He doesn’t even have plates on it yet!’

‘. . . But, I . . .’

Range Rover Man stepped in and said, ‘Stop. Calm down. Stop.’

‘But it’s a brand-new car!’

‘Shouting about it isn’t going to change things.’

The yelling quietened down and I said to Range Rover Man, ‘I was trying to do a good deed, letting you out.’

‘It’s okay.’

Suddenly I realized that he was very angry and in an instant I’d got him – one of those good-looking spoilt men, with his expensive car and his well-cut coat and his expectation that life would treat him nicely.

‘At least no one was hurt,’ I said.

Range Rover Man wiped some blood off his forehead. ‘Yeah. At least no one was hurt . . .’

‘I mean, like, not seriously . . .’

‘I know.’ He sighed. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Fine,’ I said, stiffly. I didn’t want his concern.

‘I’m sorry if I was . . . you know. It’s been a bad day.’

‘Whatever.’

It was mayhem all around us. The traffic was tail-backed in both directions, ‘helpful’ passers-by were offering conflicting eye-witness reports and the shouty man started shouting again.

A kind person led me away to sit on a doorstep while we waited for the police and another kind person gave me a bag of sweets. ‘For your blood sugar,’ she said. ‘You’ve had a shock.’

Very quickly the police showed up and started redirecting traffic and taking statements. Shouty Man shouted a lot and kept jabbing his finger at me, and Range Rover Man was talking soothingly, and I watched them both like I was watching a movie. There was my car, I thought, hazily. Banjaxed. A total write-off. It was utterly miraculous that I’d stepped out of it in one piece.

The accident was Shouty Man’s fault and his insurance would have to cough up, but I wouldn’t get enough to replace

my car because insurance companies always underpaid. Ryan would go mad – despite his success we were constantly teetering on the brink of brokenness – but I'd worry about that later. For the moment I was happy enough sitting on this step eating sweets.

Hold on! Range Rover Man was on the move. He strode over to me, his open overcoat flying. 'How do you feel now?' he asked.

'Great.' Because I did. Shock, adrenaline, one of those things.

'Can I have your phone number?'

I laughed in his face. 'No!' What kind of creep was he, that he tried to pick up women at the scene of a traffic accident? 'Anyway, I'm married!'

'For the insurance . . . ?'

'Oh.' *God. The shame, the shame.* 'Okay.'

So let's look at the karmic fallout from my good deed – three cars, all of them damaged, one wounded forehead, much irateness, shouting, raised blood pressure, financial worry and deep, *deep* blush-making humiliation. Bad, bad, all very bad.

ME

Friday, 30 May

14.49

You know, if you glanced up at my window right now, you'd think to yourself, 'Look at that woman. Look at the diligent way she's sitting upright at her desk. Look at the assiduous way her hands are poised over her keyboard. She's obviously working very hard . . . hold on . . . is that Stella Sweeney?! Back in Ireland? Writing a new book?! I'd heard she was all washed up!'

Yes, I *am* Stella Sweeney. Yes, I *am* (much to my disappointment, but we won't get into it now) back in Ireland. Yes, I *am* writing a new book. Yes, I *am* all washed up.

But I won't be all washed up for long. No indeed. Because I'm working. You only have to look at me here at my desk! Yes, I'm working.

. . . Except I'm not. Looking like you're working isn't quite the same thing as *actually* working. I haven't typed a single word. I can think of nothing to say.

A small smile plays about my lips, though. Just in case you're looking in. Being in the public eye does that to a person. You have to look smiley and act nice all the time, or else people will say, 'The fame went to her head. And it's not like she was any good in the first place.'

I'll have to get curtains, I decide. I won't be able to sustain

this smiling business. Already my face is hurting and I've only been sitting here for fifteen minutes. Twelve, actually. How *slow* the time is going!

I type one word. 'Arse.' It doesn't further my case, but it feels nice to write something.

'Begin at the beginning,' Phyllis had told me, that terrible day in her office in New York, a few months ago. 'Do an introduction. Remind people of who you are.'

'Have they forgotten already?'

'Sure.'

I'd never liked Phyllis – she was a terrifying little bulldog of a creature. But I wasn't supposed to like her – she was my agent, not my friend.

The first time I'd met her she'd waved my book in the air and said, 'We could go a long ways with this. Drop ten pounds and you've got yourself an agent.'

I'd cut out the carbs and dropped five of the stipulated ten pounds, then there was a sit-down where she was persuaded to settle for seven pounds and me wearing Spanx whenever I was on TV.

And Phyllis was right: we *did* go a long way with that book. A long way up, then a long way sideways, then a long way off the map. So far off the map that I'm sitting here at a desk in my small house in the Dublin suburb of Ferrytown, which I thought I'd escaped for ever, trying to write another book.

Okay, I'll write my introduction.

Name: Stella Sweeney.

Age: forty-one and a quarter.

Height: average.

Hair: long, curly and blonde-ish.

Recent life events: dramatic.

No, that won't do; it's too bare. It needs to be more chatty, more lyrical. I'll try again.

Hello, there! Stella Sweeney here. Slim, thirty-eight-year-old Stella Sweeney. I know you need no reminding of who I am but, just in case, I wrote the international best-selling inspirational book *One Blink at a Time*. I was on talk shows and everything. They worked me to the bone on several book tours that took in thirty-four US cities (if you count Minneapolis–St Paul as two places). I flew in a private plane (once). Everything was lovely I, absolutely lovely, except for the bits that were horrible. Living the dream, I was! Except for when I wasn't . . . But the wheel of fate has turned again and I find myself in very different, more humbling circumstances. Adjusting to the latest twist my life has taken has been painful but ultimately rewarding. Inspired by my new wisdom, not to mention the fact that I'm skint.

No, bad idea to mention the skintness, I'd better take that out . . . I hit the delete key until all mention of money has disappeared, then start typing again.

Inspired by my new wisdom, I'm trying to write a new book. I've no idea what it's about but I'm hoping if I throw enough words onto a screen, I'll be able to cobble something together. Something even more inspirational than *One Blink at a Time*!

That's grand. That'll do. Okay, maybe that second-last sentence needs to be tidied up, but, fundamentally, I'm out of the traps. Fair play to me. As a reward, I'll just take a quick look on Twitter . . .

*

. . . Amazing how you can lose three hours just like *that*. I emerge from my Twitter hole, dazed to find myself still at my desk, still in my tiny 'office' (i.e. spare bedroom) in my old house in Ferrytown. In Twitterland we were having a great old chat about summer having finally arrived. Every time it seemed like the discussion might be about to taper off, someone new came in and reignited the whole thing. We discussed fake tan, cos lettuce, shameful feet . . . It was fecking *fantastic*. FANTASTIC!

I'm feeling great! I remember reading somewhere that the chemicals produced in the brain by a lengthy Twitter session are similar to those produced by cocaine.

Abruptly my bubble pops and I'm faced with the fairy-dust-free facts: I wrote ten sentences today. That's not enough.

I will work now. I will, I will, I will. If I don't I'll have to punish myself by disabling the Internet on this computer . . .

. . . Is that Jeffrey I hear?

It is! In he comes, slamming the front door and throwing his wretched yoga mat onto the hall floor. I can sense every move that yoga mat makes. I'm always aware of it, the way you are when you hate something. It hates me too. It's like we're in a battle over ownership of Jeffrey.

I jump up to say hello even though Jeffrey hates me almost as much as his yoga mat does. He's hated me for ages now. About five years, give or take, basically since the moment he hit thirteen.

I'd thought it was girls who were meant to be nightmare teenagers and that boys simply went mute for the duration. But Betsy wasn't bad at all and Jeffrey has been full of . . . well . . . *angst*. In fairness, by dint of having me as his mother, he's had a roller coaster of a time of it, so much so that when he was fifteen he asked to be put up for adoption.

However, I'm delighted that I can stop pretending to work

for a little while, and I run down the stairs. 'Sweetheart!' I try to act like the hostility between us doesn't exist.

There he is, six foot tall, as thin as a pipe-cleaner and with an Adam's apple as big as a muffin. He looks exactly like his father did at that age.

I sense extra animosity from him today.

'What?' I ask.

Without looking at me he says, 'Get your hair cut.'

'Why?'

'Just do. You're too old to have it that long.'

'What's going on?'

'From the back you look . . . different.'

I coax the story out of him. It transpires that this morning, he was 'down the town' with one of his yoga friends. Outside the Pound Shop the friend had spotted me from the rear and made admiring noises and Jeffrey had said, from bloodless lips, 'That's my mom. She's forty-one and a quarter.'

I deduce that both of them were badly shaken by the experience.

Maybe I should be flattered, but the thing is I know I'm not too bad from the back. The front, however, is not so good. I'm that strange shape where any weight I put on goes straight to my stomach. Even as a teenager, when everyone else was worried sick about the size of their arse and the width of their thighs, I'd kept an anxious eye on my mid-section. I knew it had the potential to go rogue and my life has been one long battle to contain it.

Jeffrey swings a shopping bag of peppers at me, with what can only be called aggression. ('He menaced me with capsicums, your Honour.') I sigh inwardly. I know what's coming. He wants to cook. Again. This is a fairly new departure and, against all evidence to the contrary, he thinks he's brilliant at it. As he searches for his niche in life, he combines risibly

mismatched ingredients and makes me eat the results. Rabbit and mango stew, that's what we had last night.

'I'm cooking dinner.' He dead-eyes me as he waits for me to cry.

'Grand,' I say, brightly.

That means we'll get fed around midnight. Just as well I have a stash of Jaffa Cakes in my bedroom, so big it almost covers an entire wall.

19.41

I tiptoe into the kitchen, to find Jeffrey staring motionless at a tin of pineapple, as if it was a chessboard and he was a Grand Master, planning his next move.

'Jeffrey . . .'

Tonelessly, he says, 'I'm concentrating. Or rather, I was.'

'Do I have time to visit Mum and Dad before dinner?' See what I did there? I didn't just say, 'What time will I be getting fed?' I made it not about me, but about his grandparents, which hopefully will soften his angry heart.

'I don't know.'

'I'm just going out for an hour.'

'Dinner will be ready by then.'

It won't be. He's keeping me trapped. I'll have to confront this passive-aggressive warfare at some stage, but I'm feeling so defeated by my pointless day and my pointless life that, right now, I'm not able.

'Okay . . .'

'Please don't come in here while I'm working.'

I go back upstairs and wish I could tweet '#Working #MyHole' but some of his friends follow me on Twitter. Besides, any time I send a tweet, it reminds people that I'm nobody now and that it's time to unfollow me. That is a true measurable fact which I sometimes test, just in case I'm not feeling like enough of a loser.

In fairness, I was never Lady Gaga with her millions and millions of followers, but, in my own small way, I was once a Twitter presence.

Denied an outlet for my gloom, I remove a brick from my Jaffa Cake wall and lie on my bed and eat many of the little round discs of chocolate-and-orange happiness. So many

that I can't tell you because I made a deliberate decision to not count. Plenty, though. Rest assured of that.

Tomorrow will be different, I tell myself. Tomorrow will *have* to be different. There will be lots of writing and lots of productivity and no Jaffa Cakes. I will not be a woman who lies on her bed, her chest covered with spongy crumbs.

An hour and a half later, still a dinner-free woman, I hear a car door slam and feel someone hurrying up our little path. In this cardboard house, you can not just hear, but you can *feel* everything that happens within a fifty-metre radius.

'Dad's here.' There is alarm in Jeffrey's voice. 'He looks a bit mental.'

The doorbell begins to ring frantically. I hurry down the stairs and open the door and there is Ryan. Jeffrey is right: he *does* look a bit mental.

Ryan pushes past me into the hall and, with zeal that borders on the manic, says, 'Stella, Jeffrey, I've got some fantastic news!'

Let me tell you about my ex-husband, Ryan. He might put things differently, which he's welcome to do, but as this is my story, you're getting my version.

We got together when I was nineteen and he was twenty-one and he had notions about being an artist. Because he was very good at drawing dogs and because I knew nothing about art, I thought he was highly talented. He was accepted into art college where, to our mutual dismay, he showed no signs of being the breakout star of his generation. We used to have long talks, late into the night, where he'd tell me all the different ways his tutors were cretins and I'd stroke his hands and agree with him.

After four years he graduated with a mediocre degree and began painting for a living. But no one bought his

canvases, so he decided that painting was over. He played around with different media – film, graffiti, dead budgies in formaldehyde – but a year passed and nothing took off. Ultimately a pragmatic man, Ryan faced facts: he didn't like being perpetually penniless. He wasn't cut out for this starving-in-a-garret business that seems to be the stock-in-trade of most artists. Besides, he had acquired a wife (me) and a young daughter, Betsy. He needed to get a job. But not just any old job. After all, he was, despite everything, an artist.

Around this time, my dad's glamorous sister, Auntie Jeanette, came into a few quid and decided to spend it on something she'd coveted since she was a little girl – a beautiful bathroom. She wanted something – said with an airy wave of her hand – 'fabulous'. Jeanette's poor husband, Uncle Peter, who had spent the previous twenty years desperately trying to provide the glamour that Jeanette so clearly craved, asked, 'What sort of fabulous?' But Jeanette couldn't actually say. ' . . . Just, you know, *fabulous*.'

Peter (he later admitted this to my dad) had a dreadful moment when he thought he might start sobbing and never stop, then he was saved from such humiliation by a brain-wave. 'Why don't we ask Stella to ask Ryan?' he said. 'He's artistic.'

Ryan was mortified to be consulted on such a mundane project and he told me to tell Auntie Jeanette that she could feck off, that he was an artist and that artists didn't 'bother their barney' on the placement of wash-hand basins. But I hate confrontation and I was afraid of causing a family rift, so I couched Ryan's refusal in vaguer terms. So vague that an armload of bathroom brochures were dropped off for Ryan's perusal.

They sat on our small kitchen table for over a week. Now

and again I'd pick one up and say, 'God, that's gorgeous,' and, 'Would you look at that? So imaginative.'

You see, I was keeping our little family afloat by working as a beautician, and I'd have been very grateful if Ryan had started bringing in some money. But Ryan refused to take the bait. Until one night he began to leaf through the pages and suddenly he was engaged. He picked up a pencil and some graph paper and within no time he was applying himself with vigour. 'She wants fabulous,' he muttered. 'I'll give her fabulous.'

Over the following days and weeks he laboured on layout, he spent hours scouring *Buy and Sell* (these were pre-eBay days) and he jumped out of bed in the middle of the night, his artistic head fizzing with artistic ideas.

News of Ryan's diligence began to spread through my family and people were impressed. My dad, who had never been keen on Ryan, reluctantly began to revise his opinion. He stopped saying, 'Ryan Sweeney an artist? Piss-artist, more like!'

The result – and everyone was agreed on this, even Dad, a sceptical, working-class man – was indeed fabulous: Ryan had created a mini Studio 54. As he'd been born in Dublin in 1971, he'd never had the honour of visiting the iconic nightclub, so he had to base his design on photos and anecdotal evidence. He even wrote to Bianca Jagger. (She didn't reply but, still, it shows the lengths he was prepared to go to.)

As soon as you put a foot into the bathroom, the floor lit up and Donna Summer's 'Love to Love You, Baby' began to play softly. Natural light was banished and replaced with an ambient gold glow. The cabinets – and there were plenty of them because Auntie Jeanette had a lot of stuff – were coated with glitter. Andy Warhol's *Marilyn* was recreated in eight thousand tiny mosaic tiles and covered an entire wall. The bath was

egg-shaped and black. The toilet was housed off in an adorable little black lacquer cubicle. The make-up station had enough theatrical-style light bulbs to power the whole of Ferrytown (Jeanette had stipulated 'brutal' lighting; she was proud of her skill in blending foundations and concealer but she couldn't do it in poor visibility).

When, with a final flourish, Ryan hung a small glitter ball from the ceiling, he knew that the masterpiece was complete.

It could have been tacky, it skirted within a millimetre of being kitsch, but it was – as stipulated in the brief – 'fabulous'. Auntie Jeanette issued invitations to family and friends for the Grand Opening and the dress code was Disco. As a little joke, Ryan purchased a one-ounce bag of fenugreek from the Ferrytown health-food shop and chopped it into lines on the elegant hand basin. Everyone thought that was 'gas'. (Except Dad. 'There's nothing funny about drugs. Even pretend ones.')

The mood was festive. Everyone, young and old, in their disco-est of clothes, crowded in and danced on the small flashing floor. I, overjoyed that a) a family rift had been averted and b) that Ryan had done some paying work, was probably the happiest person there. I wore a pair of vintage Pucci palazzo pants and a matching tunic that I'd found in the Help the Aged shop and had washed seven times, and my hair was blow-dried into a Farrah flick by a hairdresser pal in exchange for a manicure. 'You look beautiful,' Ryan told me. 'So do you,' I replied, perky as you please. I meant it too because, let's face it, suddenly becoming a wage-earner would add lustre to the most ordinary-looking of men. (Not that Ryan was ordinary-looking. If he'd washed his hair more often, he could have been dangerous.) All in all, it was a very happy day.

Suddenly Ryan had a career. Not the one he'd wanted, no,

but one he was very good at. He followed his Studio 54 triumph by going in a different direction – he created a bathroom that was a green-filtered, peaceful, forest-style retreat. Mosaics of trees covered three walls and real ferns climbed the fourth. The window was replaced with green glass and the soundtrack was of birdcalls. For the final reveal to the client Ryan scattered pine cones around the place. (His original plan had been to source a squirrel but, despite Caleb his electrician and Drugi his tiler spending most of a morning shaking nuts and shouting, ‘Here, squirrely!’ in Crone Woods, they weren’t able to catch one.)

Hot on the heels of the forest bathroom came the project that got Ryan his first magazine coverage – the Jewel Box. It was a wonderland of mirrors, Swarovski tiles and claret-coloured velvet-effect (but water-resistant) wallpaper. The cabinet knobs were Bohemian crystal, the bath was made of silver-flecked glass and a Murano chandelier hung from the ceiling. The soundtrack (Ryan’s music was fast becoming his USP) was the ‘Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’ and every time you turned the taps on, a tiny mechanical ballerina rotated gracefully.

Working with a small, trusted team, Ryan Sweeney became the go-to man for amazing bathrooms. He was imaginative, painstaking and ferociously expensive.

Life was good. There was the odd hiccup – when Betsy was three months old, I got pregnant with Jeffrey. But, thanks to Ryan’s success, we were able to buy a newly built, three-bedroomed house, big enough for the four of us.

Time passed. Ryan made money, he made beautiful bathrooms, he made people – mostly women – happy. At the end of every project, Ryan’s client exclaimed, ‘You’re an artist!’ They meant it and Ryan knew it, but he was the wrong sort of artist: he wanted to be Damien Hirst. He wanted to

be famous and notorious, he wanted people on late-night arty-discussion shows to shout at each other about him, he wanted some people to say he was a fake. Well, he didn't. He wanted everyone to say he was a genius, but the best sort of genius generates controversy so he was prepared to put up with the occasional slagging.

Nevertheless, all was well until one day in 2010, when a tragedy befell him. Strictly speaking, the tragedy was mine. But artists, even unfulfilled ones, have a habit of making everything about themselves. The tragedy, a long-running one, didn't bring everyone together, because life isn't a soap opera. The tragedy ended with Ryan and me splitting up.

Almost immediately, strange, exciting things began to happen to me – which we'll get to. All you need to know for now is that Betsy, Jeffrey and I moved to live in New York.

Ryan stayed in Dublin in the house which we'd bought as an investment in the mid-noughties when everyone in Ireland was tying up their futures in second properties. (I got our original starter home in the divorce. Even when I was living in a ten-room duplex on the Upper West Side, I hung on to it – I never trusted that my new circumstances would last. I was always afraid of boomeranging back to poverty.)

Ryan had girlfriends – once he'd started washing his hair more regularly, there was no shortage. He had his work, he had a nice car and a motorbike – he wanted for nothing. But he wanted for everything: he never felt fulfilled. The gnawing pain of incompleteness sometimes went underground but it always returned.

And now here he is, standing wild-eyed in my hall, myself and Jeffrey looking at him in alarm. 'It's happened, it's finally happened!' Ryan says. 'My big artistic idea!'

'Come in and sit down,' I say. 'Jeffrey, put the kettle on.'

Babbling unstoppably, Ryan follows me into the front room, telling me what has happened. 'It started about a year ago . . .'

We sit facing each other while Ryan describes his breakthrough. A stirring had started deep down in him and, over the course of a year, swam its way upwards to consciousness. It visited him in vague forms in his dreams, in flash-seconds between thoughts, and, this very afternoon, his brilliant idea finally broke the surface. It had taken nearly twenty years of toiling with high-grade Italian sanitaryware for his genius to burst into bloom but finally it had.

'And?' I prompt.

'I'm calling it Project Karma: I'm going to give away everything I own. Every single thing. My CDs, my clothes, all my money. Every television, every grain of rice, every holiday photograph. My car, my motorbike, my house –'

Jeffrey stares in disgust. 'You stupid asshole.'

All credit to him, Jeffrey seems to hate Ryan as much as he hates me. He's an equal opportunities hater. He could have done that thing that children of separated couples sometimes do, of playing the parents against each other, of pretending to have favourites, but in all honesty you'd have been hard-pressed to know which one of us he hated the most.

'You'll have nowhere to live!' Jeffrey says.

'Wrong!' Ryan's eyes are sparkling (but the wrong sort of sparkling, a scary form). 'Karma will see me right.'

'But what if it doesn't?' I feel horribly uneasy. I don't trust karma, not any more. Once upon a time, something very bad happened to me. As a direct result of that very bad thing, something very, very good happened. I was a *big* believer in karma at that point. However, as a direct result of that very, very good thing, a very bad thing happened. Then another

bad thing. I am currently due an upswing in my karma cycle, but it doesn't seem to be happening. Frankly, I've had it with karma.

And on a more practical level, I am afraid that if Ryan has no money I'll have to give him some and I have almost none myself.

'I will prove that karma exists,' Ryan says. 'I'm creating Spiritual Art.'

'Can I have your house?' Jeffrey asks.

Ryan seems startled. He hasn't considered such a request. '. . . Ah, no. No.' As he speaks, he becomes more convinced. 'Definitely not. If I gave it to you, it might look like I wasn't doing it for real.'

'Can I have your car?'

'No.'

'Can I have anything?'

'No.'

'Fuck you very much.'

'Jeffrey, don't,' I say.

Ryan is so excited he barely notices Jeffrey's contempt. 'I'll blog about it, day by day, second by second. It'll be an artistic triumph.'

'I think this sort of thing has already been done.' A memory of something, somewhere, is flickering.

'Don't,' Ryan says. 'Stella, don't undermine me. You've had your fifteen minutes, let me have mine.'

'But –'

'No, Stella.' He's all but shouting. 'It should have been me. I'm the one who's meant to be famous. Not you – me! You're the woman who stole my life!'

This is a familiar conversational theme; Ryan refers to it almost daily.

Jeffrey is clicking away on his phone. 'It *has* been done. I'm

getting loads here. Listen to this: "The man who gave away everything he possessed." Here's another one, "An Austrian millionaire is planning to give away all his money and possessions."

'Ryan,' I say, tentatively, keen to avoid triggering another rant from him. 'Could you be . . . depressed?'

'Do I seem depressed?'

'You seem insane.'

Even before he speaks, I know he's going to say, 'I've never been saner.' Sure enough, Ryan obliges.

'I need you to help me, Stella,' he says. 'I need publicity.'

'You're never out of the magazines.'

'Home decor magazines.' Ryan dismisses them with contempt. 'They're no good. You're matey with the mainstream media.'

'Not any more.'

'. . . Ah, you are. A lot of residual affection for you. Even if it's all gone to shit.'

'How are you going to make money from this?' Jeffrey asks.

'Art isn't about making money.'

Jeffrey mutters something. I catch the word 'knobhead'.

After Ryan leaves, Jeffrey and I look at each other.

'Say something,' Jeffrey says.

'He won't go through with it.'

'You think?'

'I think.'

22.00

Jeffrey and I are sitting in front of the telly eating our pepper, pineapple and sausage stew. I'm trying hard to force down a few mouthfuls – these dinners of Jeffrey count as Cruel and Unusual Punishment – and Jeffrey has his face in his phone.

Suddenly he says, 'Fuck.' It's the first word we've exchanged in a while.

'What?'

'Dad. He's issued a Mission Statement . . . and . . .' Speedy clicking. '. . . his first video blog. And he's started a count-down to Day Zero. It's Monday week, ten days' time.'

Project Karma is a go.

‘Keep breathing.’

Extract from *One Blink at a Time*

Let me tell you about the tragedy that befell me nearly four years ago. There I was, being thirty-seven and the mother of a fifteen-year-old girl and a fourteen-year-old boy and the wife of a successful but creatively unfulfilled bathroom designer. I was working with my younger sister, Karen (but really *for* my younger sister, Karen), and generally I was being very normal – life was having its ups and downs but nothing to get excited about – when, one evening, the tips of the fingers on my left hand started to tingle. By bedtime, my right hand was also tingling. Maybe it’s a sign of how dull everything was that I found it pleasant, like having space-dust popping under my skin.

Sometime during the night, I half-woke and noticed that now my feet were tingling as well. Lovely, I thought, dreamily, space-dust feet too. Maybe in the morning I’d be tingling everywhere and wouldn’t *that* be nice.

When the alarm went off at 7 a.m., I felt knackered, but that was par for the course. I felt knackered every morning – after all, I was very normal. But this particular morning, it was a different sort of tiredness: a bad, heavy, made-of-lead tiredness.

‘Get up,’ I said to Ryan, then I stumbled down the stairs – and in retrospect, I probably really *was* stumbling –

and started boiling kettles and throwing boxes of cereal onto the table, then I went upstairs to rouse (i.e. shout at) my children.

I went back downstairs and took a swig of tea, but to my surprise it tasted strange and metallic. I stared accusingly at the stainless-steel kettle – clearly bits of it had infiltrated my tea. It had been such a good friend all these years, why had it suddenly turned on me?

Giving it another wounded look, I started on Jeffrey's special toast, which was simply ordinary toast without the butter – he had a 'thing' about butter, he said it was slimy – but my hands felt fumbly and numb, and the enjoyable tingling had stopped.

I took a mouthful of orange juice, then spat it out and yelped.

'What?' Ryan had appeared. He was never good in the mornings. He was never good in the evenings either, come to think of it. He might have been in top form in the middle of the day, but I never got to see him then, so I couldn't comment.

'The orange juice,' I said. 'It burned me.'

'Burned you? It's orange juice; it's cold.'

'It burned my tongue. My mouth.'

'Why are you talking like that?'

'Like what?'

'Like . . . your tongue is swollen.' He grabbed my glass and took a swig, and said, 'There's nothing wrong with that orange juice.'

I tried another sip. It burned me again.

Jeffrey materialized at my side and said accusingly, 'Did you put butter on this toast?'

'No.'

We played this game every morning.

'You've put butter on it,' he said. 'I can't eat it.'

‘Okay.’

He looked at me in surprise.

‘Give him some money,’ I ordered Ryan.

‘Why?’

‘So he can buy himself something for breakfast.’

Startled, Ryan handed over a fiver and, startled, Jeffrey took it.

‘I’m off,’ Ryan said.

‘Grand. Bye. Okay, kids, get your stuff.’ Normally I ran through a checklist as long as my arm for all their extra-curricular activities – swimming, hockey, rugby, the school orchestra – but today I didn’t bother. Sure enough, about ten minutes into the car journey, Jeffrey said, ‘I forgot my banjo.’

There was no way I was turning around and going back to get it. ‘You’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘You can manage without it for one day.’

A blanket of stunned silence fell in the car.

At the school gate dozens of privileged, cosmopolitan teenagers were milling in. It was one of the greatest sources of pride in my life that Betsy and Jeffrey were pupils at Quartley Daily, a non-denominational, fee-paying school, which aimed to educate ‘the whole child’. My guilty pleasure was to watch them as they traipsed in, in their uniforms, both of them tall and a little gawky, Betsy’s blonde curls swinging in a ponytail and Jeffrey’s dark hair sticking up in tufts. I always took a moment to watch them merge with the other kids (some of them the offspring of diplomats – the light bulb of my pride glowed extra-bright at that bit, but obviously I kept it to myself; the only person I ever admitted it to was Ryan). But today I didn’t hang around. My focus was on home, where I was hoping for a quick lie-down before going to work.

As soon as I let myself into the house, I was overtaken by a wave of weakness so powerful I had to lie down in the hall. With the side of my face pressed against the cold floorboards, I knew I couldn't go to work. This was maybe the first sick day of my life. Even with a hangover I'd always shown up; the work ethic went deep in me.

I rang Karen and my fingers could barely work the phone. 'I've the flu,' I said.

'You haven't the flu,' she said. 'Everyone says they've the flu when they just have a cold. Believe me, if you had the flu, you'd know all about it.'

'I do know all about it,' I said. 'I've the flu.'

'Are you putting on that funny voice so I'll believe you?'

'Really. I've the flu.'

'Tongue flu, is it?'

'I'm sick, Karen, I swear to God. I'll be in tomorrow.'

I crawled up the stairs, stumbled gratefully into bed, set my phone for 3 p.m. and fell into a deep sleep.

I woke dry-mouthed and disoriented and when I reached for a swig of water, I couldn't swallow it. I focused hard on waking myself up and swallowing the water, but nothing happened: I really couldn't swallow it. I had to spit it back into the glass.

Then I realized that, even without the water in my mouth, I couldn't swallow. The muscles at the back of my throat just wouldn't work. I concentrated hard on them, trying to ignore the rising panic, but nothing happened. I couldn't swallow. I actually, really, couldn't swallow.

Scared, I rang Ryan. 'There's something wrong with me. I can't swallow.'

'Have a Strepsil and take some Panadol.'

'I don't mean my throat is sore. I mean I can't swallow.'

He sounded bemused. 'But everyone can swallow.'

'I can't. My throat won't work.'

'Your voice sounds funny.'

'Can you come home?'

'I'm on a site visit. In Carlow. It'll take a couple of hours. Why don't you go to the doctor?'

'Okay. See you later.' Then I tried to stand up and my legs wouldn't work.

When Ryan came home and saw the state of me, he was gratifyingly contrite. 'I didn't realize . . . Can you walk?'

'No.'

'And you still can't swallow? Christ. I think we should ring an ambulance. Should we ring an ambulance?'

'Okay.'

'Really? It's that bad?'

'How do I know? It might be.'

A while later an ambulance arrived, with men who strapped me to a stretcher. Leaving my bedroom, I had a stab of sudden shocking grief, as if I had a premonition that it would be a long, long time before I saw it again.

Watched by Betsy, Jeffrey and my mum, who were standing at the front door, silent and scared-looking, I was loaded into the van.

'We could be gone a while,' Ryan told them. 'You know what A&E is like. We'll probably be hanging around for hours.'

But I was a priority case. Within an hour of my arrival a doctor appeared and said, 'So? Muscular weakness?'

'Yes.' My speech had degenerated so much that the word emerged like a slurred grunt.

'Talk properly,' Ryan said.

'I'm trying.'

'This the best you can do?' The doctor seemed interested.

I tried to nod and found that I couldn't.

'Can you squeeze that?' The doctor gave me a pen.

We all watched as the pen fell from my clumsy fingers.

'How about the other hand? No? Can you raise your arm? Flex your foot? Wriggle your toes? No?'

'Of course you can,' Ryan said to me. 'She can,' he repeated, but the doctor had turned to talk to someone else in a white coat. I caught the occasional phrase: 'a fast-moving paralysis', 'respiratory function'.

'What's wrong with her?' There was panic in Ryan's voice.

'Too soon to say but all of her muscles are shutting down.'

'Can't you do something?' Ryan beseeched.

The doctor was gone, being dragged across the room to another crisis.

'Come back!' Ryan ordered. 'You can't just say that and then not -'

'Excuse me.' A nurse pushing a pole ushered Ryan out of her way. To me, she said, 'Just get you on a drip. If you can't swallow, you'll get dehydrated.'

Her search for a vein hurt, but not as much as what happened next: a catheter was put into me.

'Why?' I asked.

'Because you can't get to the toilet on your own. And just in case your kidneys stop working.'

'Am I . . . going to die?'

'What? What are you saying? No, of course you're not.'

'How do you know? Why am I speaking so funny?'

'What?'

Another nurse showed up, wheeling a machine. She put a mask over my face. 'Breathe into that, good woman. I just want to measure your . . .' She watched yellow digital figures on the screen. 'Breathe, I said.'

I was. Well, I was trying to.

To my surprise, the nurse started speaking loudly, almost shouting – numbers and codes – and suddenly I was on the move, being whizzed on a wheely bed through wards and corridors, on my way to intensive care. Everything was happening really fast. I tried to ask what was going on, but no sounds came out. Ryan was running beside me and he was trying to decipher the medical language. ‘I think it’s your lungs,’ he said. ‘I think they’re shutting down. Breathe, Stella, for God’s sake, breathe! Do it for the kids if you won’t do it for me!’

Just as my lungs gave up, a hole was cut in my throat – a tracheotomy – and a tube was shoved down into me and attached to a ventilator.

I was put in a bed in the intensive care ward; countless tubes ran in and out of my body. I could see and hear and I knew exactly what was happening to me. But, except for being able to blink my eyes, I couldn’t move. I couldn’t swallow, or talk, or wee, or breathe. When the last vestiges of movement left my hands, I had no way of communicating.

I was buried alive in my own body.

As tragedies go, it’s quite a good one, no?