

PRAISE FOR *MY BIGGEST LIE*
BY LUKE BROWN

'A real page-turner. Deeply sensual.'

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'I grabbed this for its mad adventure but came away with a gift for the heart.'

DBC Pierre

'Smart, zingy and extremely funny, this is a real treat.'

Paul Murray

'Its warmth and tenderness are hard to resist.'

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'Brown's deliciously tricky novel encourages its reader to pay attention to correspondences between art and life . . . It captures the sun-soaked sexiness of the city . . . and the hazy drug that is desire better than anything I have read in years.'

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Big Issue

THEFT

Luke Brown



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For Jacquie, Naomi and Rachel

'I never cared one bit about the property. I cared about herself – and always shall do.'

BRANWELL BRONTË TO J. B. LEYLAND, 1846

'... theft'

WHAT IS PROPERTY?, 1840

'Verily, what with tainting, plundering and spoiling, Tom has his revenge.'

BLEAK HOUSE, 1853

PART ONE

ONE

What I did to them was terrible, but you have to understand the context. This was London, 2016. My friends and I had lived our adult lives in flats with living rooms made into bedrooms, kitchens into pop-up cocktail bars and gallery spaces; we worked in pubs and shops and schools and clung on to our other lives as artists and musicians and professional skateboarders. For too long I'd suspected that I would have been more successful if I'd spent less time talking to my friends, if I had been more discerning about who they were, if I had put to another use the ten thousand hours in which I had discussed the meaning of love with the lunatics who wouldn't leave my sofa. How much more organised and efficient I thought my mind might be if it had not had so much company. I worried that I had sabotaged myself, ruined myself for both distinction and the humdrum, and I wished I had become another man, a better man, a man who I suppose would feel no sympathy for me, a superior bastard, a loathsome know-it-all, who would replace me, and get away with it, and no one would mourn me. There is little point thinking about what might have been. Character means character.

My name is Paul. I work three days a week in a bookshop and write for a magazine. I am here in my predicament, and it is not so bad. Amy disagrees with me about that. But then

we disagree about nearly everything. Or we did until she disappeared.

*

‘Do you like the word *property*?’ I asked Amy.

My sister, two years younger than me, considers herself the senior.

‘Property?’ she said.

‘You say it a lot. I’ve seen this great *property*.’

‘What word should I use? What word would *you* like me to use?’

‘I don’t know, something less abstract: house, flat, maisonette, or we could change the subject, talk about, I don’t know, music, philosophy, art, love.’

‘Something less abstract?’

‘Property, property, property – do you know what I hear?’

‘What?’

‘Mine, mine, mine.’

‘Do you know what I hear when you talk about property?’

‘What?’

‘Whine, whine, whine.’

*

Recently Amy and I have come into some property together, this little terraced house, only three minutes’ walk from the sea. Open your mouth and breathe that air in, the freshest air in all of the country. Listen to the seagulls’ shrieks. Inside the house you’ll see it’s very tastefully decorated, with wooden flooring, painted walls, a modern kitchen with a door that leads out to the little garden that catches the sun in the morning. Yes, sun. Such glorious summers you could have here, by the

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waves. It could make an imaginative person a lovely holiday home. Is 'imaginative' the word? Self-reliant. You wouldn't believe how cheaply things go up here. Mortgage payments would be nothing for someone used to the price of life in London. We'll probably drop the price again soon. It's slow at the moment. Not much movement. Open the door and the freshest air just fills your lungs. The streets, seen from above, ripple out in concentric circles around a man-made hill: a pebble dropped in a pool, a feat of ambitious town planning from Decimus Burton, the Victorian architect who also designed Hyde Park, Green Park, St James's Park. People used to come on the train from miles around for their holidays. The line closed a long time ago, but even though we're surrounded on three sides by the sea we're hardly isolated. It's only forty minutes by tram to the nearest train station, and that's only three hours from London. New trams too, very comfortable. We'd live here ourselves if we could. If it were possible.

*

The magazine I write for is called *White Jesus* – who knows exactly why? The title is composed of words of equal length convenient for cover design, allows for occasional crucifixion photo shoots, appeals to the editor's messiah complex and offends 'civilians', by whom the editor might mean 'Christians', who aren't offended at all, who remain unaware of the magazine, not working in fashion or hairdressing, or living in Dalston.

I write two pages for the magazine, for little more than beer money. I pitched them to the editor, Stev'n – 'rhymes with seven', he insists – when he was going on dates with my sister and briefly listened to what I had to say. Amy, who

has been missing ever since our last argument, is sometimes attracted to awful men. (Is there another kind? she says whenever I mention this.)

In one of my pages I write about books. In the other I write about haircuts. I am paid twice the amount to write the haircut page as the books page, though it takes me less than a tenth of the time. I set forth in Hackney and Peckham, approach strangers, and ask if I can snap a picture to feature in the *London Review of Haircuts*. Alongside their picture in the magazine and online I award their hairstyle between one and five pairs of scissors – a system I developed personally and which as far as I know is unique. Hair criticism is not a hard science – it is more akin to the interpretation of dreams. Using the imaginative empathy you might find in an analyst or old-fashioned literary realist, I type a witty summary of what the person attached to the haircut is like, a précis of their secrets and longings, in fifteen to twenty words.

Increasingly, I am under pressure from Stev'n to be cruel. I understand the appeal snark holds to our readers, to our souls. I do my best to resist it. Before I approach the haircut, I have usually decided how many pairs of scissors I am to award; if it's four or above, I will reveal my rating then and there. I have to consciously fight my attraction to women with fringes, whom I usually award four and a half scissors out of five. Technically, of course, that is nine scissors, but this is not a pedantic era, not in the basement discos of Kingsland Road. I never award five pairs of scissors. Perfect hair is impossible, but the quest for perfect hair provides the page with a sense of telos, something the readers of *White Jesus* crave, even if they don't know they do. Hi, my name's Paul and I write for *White Jesus* magazine. I love your hair, it's totally four and a half scissors out of five – would you mind if I put you in the next issue? Sometimes the people I approach giggle and think




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I am joking. They are known to sneer and ask me if that is my best chat-up line. But that doesn't happen often. I choose the ones who look friendly.


*

The constant carnivalesque of the night buses, the queues for jerk chicken, the roped-off smoking sections. Contrary to popular stereotype, this is a friendly city we live in, often heartbreakingly so. Lack of friends is the least of our worries. There are lots of us out there, looking for each other, who think a new person is the most exciting thing. Not *thing*: don't purposely misconstrue me. Sentient being. Equal. Superior.

'I wish you could be a woman for a year,' said Amy. 'No, like a decade. Three decades. Then you'd see if you like to be constantly harassed and degraded.'



Amy is a serial dater in the American style that Tinder has made standard here too. She sees nothing strange about interviewing three different men a week, for a date to last forty-five minutes and consist of drinking a coffee. It is her experience, she says, that has confirmed her hypothesis that young men in London are the worst men in the world.



She gets no significant argument there from me. I know when I am beaten.

Nevertheless, I don't think it is helpful for Amy to believe in the absolute awfulness of men in this city. 'Don't you think it's dangerous for you to assume the monsters are all on the outside?' I said once to her, only once.

She took her time thinking about which way I had annoyed her most. Neither of us likes the suggestion that we know each other better than ourselves; we worry it is true.

'Is it somehow my fault these men have got wind of the imbalance in our ability to have children? My fault that they're

using my greater urgency as leverage to make suggestions about my pubic hair and its removal, or to bring up the subject of my *ideal weight*, or to refuse to make an arrangement for next Saturday, or to answer a text message? I'm talking about men, right, who place wooden shoe trees into their shoes when they take them off at night, men with separate combs and shampoos for their beards, men with Nespresso machines. For these men to want to *take every day as it comes*? For these men to talk about freedom?

'The thing is, Amy,' I said, 'I don't like men much either.'
But this is even more unfair.
'You,' she said, 'don't *need* to.'

*

Every member of the older generation who owns property has the potential to purchase part of the younger who doesn't. Perhaps it has always been this way. The young people dream of collaboration or revenge. Legal documents set out the niceties of the tension. Until recently I owned nothing, and my half-share of an inherited and what appears to be unsellable terrace in a half-alive northern town has not shaken my allegiance with the squatters in this city. These are the people who still talk to me, the ones who live in dilapidated hospitals and office blocks awaiting destruction. I have walked to their bedrooms through dark corridors in decaying horrorscapes like the scariest levels of *Resident Evil*. It's true, perhaps, that except for my sweet nature I don't have much to offer my younger friends. That one day they will decide I have been irresponsible with my opportunities, and judge me for this.

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The last time I saw Amy before she disappeared was at Christmas, which we spent alone together at Mum's house, ours now, on the Lancashire coast where we grew up, this town from where trawlers used to set out into the North Atlantic, until we were banned from fishing there by the European Economic Community after the Cod Wars in the 1970s. Hard to mourn the end of overfishing. But someone had to.

At the very end of 2015, my sister and I managed three days of peace together before the Argument, and the Argument didn't feel so different from the arguments we had had before, maybe different in scale but not in kind, but then . . . how many more can we have until our desire to avoid them leads us to avoid each other completely? The situation was difficult for both of us. We wandered around, double-jumpered, being as stingy with the heating as Mum had always been, picking up ornaments and putting them back down, finding a quid-dity in them that they had never had before. They were ours now. We looked out of the window at the spot where her car wasn't parked.

One evening we started to discuss what we would do with her furniture if we ever managed to sell the house. Amy owns two flats of her own and is always looking for new places to buy, renovate and sell on. This gives her a certain brusqueness when such matters are discussed. I was reluctant to follow her instructions and begin to list things on eBay.

'Don't tell me I'm insensitive,' she said. 'I'm being practical. You're being sentimental. And lazy. When did you even speak to Mum anyway?'

'On Sundays.'

'Sundays? I spoke to her all the time.'

'Does that make you better than me, because you rang her up all the time to moan about your life?'




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Mum is a cautious driver, she always wears her seat belt. She waits a long time to pull out at junctions. People beeped their horns behind her sometimes, and if I was beside her when they did I would fantasise about smashing their windows.

Because this is what I think happened.

With the steel barrier to her left and the long lorry to her right, the car coming too close from behind and forcing her too close to the car in front, she felt the pressure building and knew it would not subside. The strap seemed to be pulling tighter around her every second, choking off the deep breaths she tried to take. Pushed in on every side, she scabbled for the button to wind down the window, but she couldn't find it, and the car smelled of hot carpet, the crackle of kindling, bunched newspaper and firelighters, and then her hand alighted on her belt buckle, on the one restraint she could undo, unclipping it just before she blacked out and hit the car in front.

Wherever Amy has gone to, this is one of the few things that she and I can agree upon.



*

The party is about to end but it used to be such fun. We all loved each other. We were all interchangeable, in the best way. We woke up in each other's arms and stumbled out to buy breakfast, past groups of people looking just like us, right down to the same sunglasses and unisex jeans. Someone would always know someone else intimately and we would all embrace each other, breathing in the sweet smell on our necks, something sharp and carnal.

Now I wonder if this city's friendliness is the most dangerous thing about it. There is always someone to inspire new hope in you. There is always a saviour to find.