

SHE IS...

In the dark, there is anonymity.

In the darkness, she can hide.

She is lost. As she sits in the silent darkness of her car, she realises she has nowhere to go. The job and family she left behind were all she had. It seemed a good idea at the time. The control of her parents was stifling. Curfews, interrogation, disappointed glances. She was nineteen, for God's sake! The dead-end receptionist job at the small doctor's surgery was no longer enjoyable; she had so much more to offer the world. "You're so brave," her jealous friends had told her, they "couldn't wait" to get out of the small country town they called home.

But now, she is in the middle of nowhere, the straight, black road reaching into the distance ahead has no street lights, no cars. Nothing. Was she brave, or was she stupidly naive? She turns the key in the ignition. She could always go back, right? If it doesn't work out? Forcing herself to drive, she turns on the radio as a distraction from the sick, heavy feeling in her chest. Singing along loudly, she feels a fierce determination...

Two hours later, tired and hungry, she sees the glow ahead. The city. Lights. As she approaches, they twinkle and shine, calling to her. She can do this. She takes a deep breath as she drives towards a new, brighter future.

She is broken. Sitting on the floor of her sister's flat, struggling to breathe, she feels so stupid. "Don't turn on the light," she says "I don't want you to see me like this". Her face is bruised, her t-shirt ripped at the seam. Tears flow as she reveals her sorry story; the yelling, the accusations, the drunken threats. She had loved him so much. She thought he would change; she had begged him to change. The story she had always kept hidden from those she loved tumbles from her mouth, relieving some of the burden. Tonight, she had said the wrong thing, challenged him. Stupid, so, so stupid. Her bruised shoulder aches from where it hit the wall.

She had left him before, but this time there is no going back. Humiliation threatens to choke her, she is so much more intelligent than this, how could she let it get this far? A light breaks the darkness as her sister places a phone in her lap. The 1800RESPECT number glows up at her. She is so ashamed. A warm hand gently squeezes her arm. She looks up into kind, tear-filled eyes and, trembling, brings the brightness of the phone closer, making the call. She deserves better. She has to be strong; she can make it on her own.

She is fat. She had undressed alone in the dark last night, but the cold light of morning reveals her white, lumpy, horrid flesh. She pulls the blankets over her head, embracing the fact she can no longer see herself and her shame. She loves food; loves cooking for her friends and family. Sugar is a drug, food her guilty pleasure. Quickly throwing off the covers, she draws the curtains tighter, darkening the room. Taking deep breaths, she opens the

wardrobe door. Hot pink and bright yellow smile out at her, lifting her spirits. She will hide behind the pretty fabric again today.

As she drives to work, the tray of cupcakes she had lovingly baked for her staffroom morning tea on the seat beside her, she passes a woman, out jogging. Heat rises on her torso, reaching the back of her neck. She should have gotten out of bed early, taken her fat body for a walk. Two years ago, she had loved an afternoon walk with her friends, but the local hoons calling out “work it off, ya fat bitch” as they passed, had put a stop to that.

Striding into school, she smiles and waves at the students in the playground. A group of mothers are dropping off their children. They also smile in her direction. She looks at them closely, taking in their physiques. Two of them are the same size as her, but she thinks they look lovely. Why does she judge her body so much more than she judges theirs? The shriek of the bell sends everyone scurrying, to line up for class. As the gaggle of youngsters enter the classroom, bright eyes shine up at her, filled with light and love. “You look beautiful today, Miss”. Her body is filled with a rush of joy. She adores her job, her life. This is where she belongs.

She is bereft. The grief is heavy, too much to bear. They had longed for this child, planned, hoped, prayed. Full breasts and a swollen, empty belly amplify her loss. Closing her eyes, she breathes in the velvety skin of her newborn, a little girl, laying lifeless on her bare chest. The midwives had granted them one night alone with their tiny baby. One night to mourn and say goodbye. Necessary torture, because she needs closure, but how does one let go of that perfect form that grew inside her for nine months? Tears, so many tears. Her husband sits beside the bed, still and silent, head in hands. They had hugged and cried until they were empty. The darkness of the room brings comfort, allows her to focus, hold the child that will be forever in her heart, but not in her arms. She is thirsty, but dares not move, relishing the void, knowing that the next few hours are all she has. Closing her eyes, she stifles yet another sob.

Through the hospital window, in the middle of the night, she glimpses a tiny light, alone in the sky. She whispers quietly to the star; sings softly to the daughter she will never see grow. Pushing away the lump in her throat, she tries to allow a sense of peace to take over. Was that tiny light just for her? She gently kisses the baby’s downy hair and looks back at the star, knowing that she can forever look to that speck of brightness in the sky and find her.

She is ugly. The long sleeves of her shirt hide her flabby, spotted arms; the long skirt hides her stretch marks and scars, her dimpled cellulite. Heavy makeup covers the deep wrinkles and age spots on her face. She was beautiful once, admired, envied. Gravity and life have taken their toll. She is still stylish, but it’s not the same. Admiring glances and flirtation are for the young. Who would lust after this saggy, defective body? No one. She dims the lights.

Running a bath, she catches her gaunt reflection in the mirror. All she sees are deep lines and wrinkles. Breasts that were once plump, now droop and drag.

Stepping into the warm water, she lights her favourite candle. Soothing notes of lavender fill the small space. The smell takes her back to her childhood, lavender sachets in her underwear drawer, placed there by her darling mother. She has come a long way since then. Daughter, wife, sister, mother, friend, colleague. A plethora of important roles have defined her life. She is so much to so many. Touching the stretch marks on her belly reminds her of the three beautiful children she carried and nurtured. Running fingers over the scar on her chest, she acknowledges that she is a warrior, a survivor. The bright light of the flame dances over the wrinkles on her face, the result of tears, love and laughter; a well-lived life. She relaxes in the warmth and the flickering light. She is enough.

She is tired. Memory is lost to her, confusion reigns. Her aging brain grasps at a recent past that is beyond her reach. Lying there on her worn, comfortable bed, she closes her eyes and drifts into the blackness behind closed lids. If only she could leave it all behind, embrace the dark and be done with it. Done with the humiliation of searching for words that will not form, the degradation of asking the same question for the third, or fourth time. Done with life, with despair. She knows what is in store for her when the dementia eventually takes total control. She witnessed her intelligent and vibrant mother slowly, painfully losing herself. She dreads the future. There is no future for the person she is, the true person she is... was. A song from the seventies catches in her brain. How can she know all the words to that song, yet not remember what she had for breakfast? She often wishes she could just go to sleep, that eternal sleep, and not wake up.

Sleep is the only time she can really relax. Forget what she has become. As she drifts into a peaceful rest, the door opens slowly, revealing a shaft of light, behind it a smiling face. She knows this lovely face, although the name escapes her. "Hello Mum," the woman chimes. Recognition swells in her chest and tears form in her eyes. This is what she lives for, her daughter, her family. That beautiful, bright face is her world. She is her future, her legacy.

She is me. She is you. She is your mother. She is your daughter. She is your sister, your lover, your friend. She is us.

She is daunted, but hopeful; lost, but has faith; disappointed, but resilient; broken, but courageous. Life has not always been what she wanted or expected, but she continues on. She is beautiful and strong. She is enough.

She is a reminder that life is kinder and brighter when you look into the light.