

# The Poison Tree

*About the author*

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THE POISON TREE is her first novel.

ERIN KELLY

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This book is dedicated to the father of my child



The way we'd go on summer nights  
In the times we were children  
And thought we were lovers.

'The River Road', Sean O'Brien



## PROLOGUE

I let the telephone fall from my hand. Panic first cripples and then revives me. My fingertips tingle as they feel their way around the coffee table, scrabbling first for my car keys and then for my mobile. I seem to have eight limbs as I try to get dressed in the dark, pulling on my coat and a pair of oversize sheepskin boots that I usually wear as slippers. At the threshold I hesitate for a second, then rush back to my desk and fumble in the drawer for my passport and a credit card that I keep for emergencies. I pull the door behind me in silence, although blood roars and rushes in my ears. With shaking hands I double-lock it: whether to keep someone in or to keep someone out, I can't know yet.

Outside, I tiptoe, but there is a crack and a squelch as I flatten a snail beneath my sole, and when I tread in a puddle by the gate, cold water seeps through the soft suede and licks unpleasantly at my bare toes.

In the dark interior of the car I turn the key in the ignition and wince as the air blows icy cold, dispersing the fluffy clouds of my breath. My hands are so cold they feel wet; I am relieved to find a pair of woollen gloves bundled in my left pocket. Before putting them on, I use my mobile to cover the last caller's tracks. I call the house phone, wait for the click of connection and hang up before it has a chance to ring. The windscreen is opaque with frost and I do not have time to wait for the heaters to defog the glass. I wipe a porthole in the passenger window and squint back into the dark recess of the

bedroom window. If he had heard me, the light would be on by now. He would be silhouetted at the window, mouthing my name. Would that stop me? Would anything?

The car is pointed directly at the front of the house. If I turn the headlights on, they will shine into the window, so with no beams to guide me and only a smeared handprint of visibility through the windows, I pull out into the road. Only when I have guessed my way to the end of our lane do I switch on the full beam. The countryside is frosted and stark. Naked hedgerows cast eerie shapes on the road in front of me and the high banks of the narrow road throw up shadows that take human form. The dead, the missing and the missed surround me now, passive spirits who have become active ghosts. I am afraid to glance behind. They pursue me as I drive aggressively, suicidally, mounting the grass verge when I take a blind bend much too fast. The seatbelt digs into the flesh between my breasts as I make an emergency stop to avoid hitting the truck which suddenly looms in front of me. It's a filthy vehicle of indeterminate colour, tools loose in the back, moving so slowly that the driver must be drunk. I have no option but to slow to a crawl behind him.

I ought to use this enforced pause for rational thought. But there is nothing rational about this situation. I am driving alone in pyjamas and wet, clammy boots on a country lane in the middle of the night. Nobody knows where I am or why, and in dialling my own home I have erased the only clue I might have left. I had only been thinking of the others, but for the first time it strikes me that my own safety might be compromised if I continue.

A glance at my speedometer tells me that we are travelling at four miles an hour. I toot and flash, but by the cold blue glow in his cab I see that he is making a phone call. I map the road ahead in my mind. I have driven it so often that I know every pothole, kink and camber. I take a deep breath, crunch

the gears and plunge blindly into the passing place I calculate is just to my right. The driver of the black car coming in the opposite direction has had the same idea and we skim each other as we pass, with a sickening screech of paint on metal. I accelerate. Let him chase me if he wants to make something of it. My left-hand mirror is wrenched from its casing, and falls to dangle lifelessly at the side from a lone wire, like a severed limb attached to its body by a single vein. The retreating driver sounds his horn angrily, the Doppler effect making it drop a forlorn semitone as it continues in the direction of my house. The truck is between us and it is too late to turn and see if the driver was alone or carrying a passenger, if it was a regular car or a taxi.

I pick up my crazy pace. Only a speed camera, predicted by a luminous sign, persuades my foot to the brake. On the borders of the town the scrubby roadside verges give way to narrow pavements and trees thin out to accommodate houses, a pub, a petrol station. Lamp posts appear, imitation Victorian globes like a parade of tiny moons, and I realise with a corresponding lucidity that this is it. The event I have been expecting and dreading for a third of my life is finally here.

It suddenly feels very hot inside the car. My hands are sweating inside my gloves, my eyes are dry and my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. I have given up so much and done so many terrible things already for the sake of my family that I can only keep going. I do not know what is going to happen to us. I am frightened, but I feel strong. I have the strength of a woman who has everything to lose.



# I

I try to see the city through his eyes. It has only been ten years, but London has changed. Will he notice the subtle developments of the last decade? Does he register the lack of telephone boxes or the proliferation of Polish grocers? What about the plugged-in pedestrians with white wires connecting their ears to their pockets? The red circles on the road that welcome us into and usher us out of the congestion zone? I'm dying to know what he is thinking. His eyes, though, are fixed on the sycamore pods and leaves stuck under the windscreen wipers. Running commentary has never been his style, but this silence is unnerving.

Alice is talking enough for the three of us, a high-pitched stream of consciousness that spills from the back seat. She has made this journey from South-east London to our home on the Suffolk coast four times a year, every year of her life. She loves travelling home through town, preferring to inch through dirty streets rather than cruise around the motorway, even though it adds hours onto our journey. I always save this route for a special treat, when her behaviour throughout our visit has been particularly good, or when she and Rex have found saying goodbye harder than usual. Sometimes I drive through town when I need to think, knowing that Alice's nose will remain pressed against the glass as the car crawls from suburb to inner city to suburb again, that the questions she asks will be about what that man is selling or what that building is, rather than another discussion about why Daddy has to live so far away.

But this afternoon's detour isn't at Alice's request. As we creep along Holloway Road, her favourite part of the journey, her focus is inside the car. She does not seem to mind her demotion from the front seat to the back. She ignores the Caribbean barber's she loves to wave at and the metallic, space-age university building we saw being built, panel by shiny blue panel. We even pass the grimy mobile store that holds such a strange fascination for her without the usual argument about when she will be old enough for her own telephone. We stop at a red light and with a click and a giggle she slides out of her seatbelt and squeezes between the driver and passenger seats. Her twiggy fingers weave in and out of Rex's hair, tugging it, massaging his scalp, shampooing it and revealing silver threads around his ears and temples. She shoots out rapid-fire questions one after the other without waiting for answers.

'Will you take me to school when I go back next week? Will you drive Mum's car or are we going to have two? Lara's mum and dad have a car each but she *still* walks to school. Don't you think – oh my God, you can come swimming now! What's your best stroke? Mine's front crawl. Will you take me swimming?'

'I'll do whatever you want,' says Rex, and Alice kisses the top of his head. Her knees fold forward and nudge the gear stick while an elbow knocks against my head as I try to negotiate the Archway roundabout. I shout at her when I had sworn I wouldn't, not today. She shrugs off my scolding. The car swings to the left as I take the exit for the Great North Road. Rex crosses his legs, folds his arms and shifts in his seat. He knows where I'm going. Perhaps he was expecting it.

Archway Road is unusually clear, and the three of us cruise underneath the bridge in the long, low autumn dazzle. The neighbourhood has been gentrified in the decade since we lived here. We pass a designer baby boutique where a charity shop used to be. The off-licence which would sell us two

bottles of nasty wine for five pounds, even at three in the morning, has now been upgraded to a wine merchant's, and even the old pubs and restaurants look cleaner and brighter than I remember them: more plate glass, fewer metal shutters. But Archway still has some way to go, I think, as I swerve to avoid chunks of glass exploded from a bus stop window and scattered across the street like ice cubes.

Neither of us have been here for over a decade but I can still drive this street, anticipate those lights, make these gear changes, on autopilot. I could do it with my eyes shut. For a reckless second, I'm tempted to try, to close my eyes and lock the wheel on a right curve. But I make the double turn into Queenswood Lane wide-eyed and unblinking. The noise of the city falls away as we enter the secret sliver of wildwood, where the ancient trees muffle the sirens and the screeches of the street and the half-hidden houses occupy a dark green private universe, cushioned by money as much as by trunk and bough and leaf. I drive carefully between the expensive cars, their wing-mirrors tucked into their bodies in case someone unfamiliar with the road drives too quickly and knocks into one. But I am more familiar with this lane than any other road, including the one I grew up in and the one I live in now. It's the setting for most of my memories and all of my nightmares. I know every old brick wall, every bump in the road, every lamp post. The 1860s apartment block with its Italianate walled garden still sits alongside that glass-and-concrete bubble, someone's vision of the future from the 1960s that would never make it past the conservation society today. Stern Victorian townhouses tower over a pastel-coloured fairytale mansion. Their windows glower down at us.

I deliberately don't look towards the last house, the place where everything happened, before the street surrenders to the trees. I focus on the road as the leafy tunnel swallows this car for the first time and park up with the house behind me,

telling Alice that Mummy and Daddy need to stretch their legs. She tumbles out of the car and skips into the trees, her tracksuit a flash of pink through half-undressed branches. The little red lights in the heels of her trainers wink at us like tiny eyes.

‘Don’t go too far!’ I call. We watch as she drags her feet through the fallen leaves, tracing letters with her toes, staining the hem of her trousers with flakes of wet bark and leaf mould. She doesn’t know it, but she’s playing yards away from the spot where she was conceived. Rex speaks first.

‘It’s got to be done, I suppose.’ He circles the car to open my door. I get out and point the key fob at the car, and it locks with a pow-pow noise. Rex raises an eyebrow. ‘Very swish,’ he says, taking the key from me and examining it as though it contains an entire album of hi-energy dance tracks. I close my eyes to make the turn and when I open them, there it is. Exactly where we left it, I think – although where could it have gone? The four-storey townhouse surrounded not by cars and concrete but by lime and plane and birch and oak; half stucco, half grey brick, it really belongs on the end of a terrace in Islington or Hackney. Its incongruity is one of the things that always made its presence on the edge of the forest so magical. It has changed, of course. It looks naked, cleaner and more metropolitan than ever now that someone has pulled down the dark green ivy which covered all of the side wall and half the front one and found its way in through the windows in the summertime. The creamy stucco gleams, not a single peel or crack in the paint. It looks *innocent*. But then, so do I.

The flaked black paint on the front door has been replaced by flawless turquoise gloss, and the golden lion doorknocker gleams. The steep front steps – formerly a death trap of long-dead herbs tufting out of broken terracotta pots, lone rollerskates, empty wine bottles and never-to-be-read free local newspapers – have also been restored, and instead the

door is flanked by two perfectly symmetrical bay trees with twisted stems in aluminium pots. Six recycling boxes are stacked neatly and discreetly behind a magnolia tree in the front garden. Instead of the unworking bell-pull which no-one ever bothered with, there are six buzzers. The first time I ever came here, I spent ten minutes looking for just such a row of doorbells bearing different names. It didn't occur to me that people my age could live in the whole of this building rather than occupy an apartment within it. I don't need to get any closer to know how the place has changed on the inside. Without peering through the white-shuttered windows, I know exactly how the interiors of these flats will look: coir or sisal carpeting, because the battered floorboards were beyond restoration even for the most dedicated property developer. The black and white hall will have been renovated, an original feature that will have added value to the house price. It was in a terrible condition when we lived there, and afterwards, there was that terrible stain . . .

There will be magnolia walls with flat television sets flush against them, stainless steel kitchens, each boxy white bedroom with its own frosted-glass bathroom. It had been sold, but not until a long time after the police and the press had gone. The redevelopment had begun as soon as the yellow incident tape had been taken down and the cameras and reporters had moved on. Only then did the estate agents begin to throng the house. I had often imagined the swarm of suits trampling polystyrene and paper coffee cups discarded by reporters, looking beyond the building's grisly history, seeing only the rare opportunity to sell a sensitively converted character property in a highly desirable location, situated seconds from the Tube and on the edge of the historic Queen's Wood.

The violent physical reaction I was half-expecting – a swoon, or a full faint, or even vomiting – doesn't come. Rex too is calm, indecipherable, and it's he who has the most, and the

most gruesome, memories of this place. It was his home for twenty-four years and mine for only one summer. Alice breaks the reverie, dropping five feet from a tree I hadn't noticed her climb, bored now, asking Rex for a can of Coke because she knows I'll say no. I shrug and let him decide. Tonight, we'll sit down and establish some ground rules for dealing with Alice before she becomes hopelessly, irretrievably spoiled. But today, I'll let Rex play the indulgent father. One day won't hurt.

She gets her drink, but not from the newsagent near Highgate Tube; I bet it's still owned by the same family. They might not recognise me, but of course they would remember Rex. They would have sold enough newspapers with him on the cover. Instead, we drive up Muswell Hill Road and I let Rex and Alice jump out and into a more anonymous convenience store. Did I ever go there? The fruit and vegetables piled up in front of the shop, their dull skins patiently absorbing the fumes from my exhaust, do nothing to jog my memory. Rex and Alice are in there for a while, and it's not until she emerges, red-faced and holding out her hand, that I realise I haven't given him any money.

Before we've even reached the North Circular road that links Rex's old part of London to his new home, Alice has slipped out of her seatbelt again and is lying across the seat, kicking at the air, singing to herself and spilling sticky cola all over her clothes and the car seat. Ten years fall away and I remember another journey on this road. It was the day Rex's credit card arrived, and we celebrated by driving to the supermarket to stock up on all the food and drink we could cram into my little Fiat. Rex sat beside me losing a wrestling match with the sunroof, while Biba took up the whole of the back seat, so Guy can't have been with us. She dangled a cigarette out of the left-hand window, her feet poking out of the right-hand one in a desperate attempt to cool down. I can feel the gummy heat of that summer now. I remember the prickle of my heat

rash and the way the sweat from my body made my cheap purple t-shirt bleed dye onto my skin like an all-over bruise. I remember the way perspiration gave Rex a permanent kiss-curl in the middle of his forehead, like Superman. I can still see the criss-cross sunburn lines on Biba's back. A pink leg comes between me and the rear-view mirror.

'Put your seatbelt on, Alice,' I say. She walks her feet up onto the ceiling, printing a thin layer of leaf mould in the shape of her shoes across the pale grey ceiling. She's testing me and I fail. 'I said, put your fucking seatbelt on, Alice!' Or did I say something else? Rex looks at me in horror while Alice, more interested in the unfolding drama than offended by my swearing, is suddenly silent and upright.

'*What* did you call her?' he says in a whisper, and at the same time Alice asks, 'Who's Biba?'