

# The Griffin

by Ruby Soames

Soundless in bare feet, Marlana used the banisters to pole-vault over the creaking stairs and landed at the drawing room's entrance. A sliver of a girl inside her polyester nightie, she moved around her five-storey Chelsea home. While they slept, she searched for answers. Her mother wouldn't have left without saying goodbye. But she *had*. She had. Marlana waited before disturbing the space, watching the weightless flecks bathe in beams of light coming through the bay window overlooking the Thames. She listened out for the heavy tread of her father stumbling to the bathroom and their latest nanny scurrying back into the nursery.

Sunday morning, the week's blank, indifferent test card.

*She's just Gone away for a While*, they said – her father, Abebi, Mrs P - even her mother's friends who rushed by to fill up shopping bags with things from her bedroom. Every question Marlana asked was bounced back to the approved line, *Just Gone for a While*, with the *Just*, edged in to minimize, trivialise, impede her investigation. They wouldn't say where her mother was, they wouldn't speak about it, even to each other, and they were scared.

*Sharp Eyes!* her mother called her when she needed something to be found – *Sharp Eyes, my Ciggies!* – *My Gold hoop earrings, by the Bathtub* – *Go Sharp Eyes, my Pill-pills*. Now she was looking for her mother, Virginia-Belle, daughter of a Texan juice-bar magnate. Virginia-Belle, so beautiful she left people vertiginous. Her looks had awarded her prizes, filled pages of catalogues and opened doors to castles, country homes and *Harry's Bar* - then, to top it all, had landed her a real, live English aristocrat for a husband.

Marlana searched the shelves for clues, counting off the roman numerals on the spines of the *Bodley Head* collection, reading inscriptions to her parents by their writer friends, looking into the black and white cloudy swirls of the *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of the Universe*. She found nothing, even in the pile of her mother's furrowed paperbacks and tomes on interior decoration double her weight. Marlana locked eyes with the people in photos of private boat parties, weddings, events with hats and horses. There was a line of silver-framed black and white prints of her parents when they were children with stern-looking, bug-eyed relatives Marlana was thankful she'd never had to meet. Against them leant Polaroids of her father and her mother in an orange tie-dye turban with her giraffe-long legs stepping into cerulean waters. A few pictures of Marlana and her little brother, Hugo, as babies, not many after that.

Her parents had had a life before her. Life, or what seemed a series of holidays. Sometimes on Saturday nights, friends came over for a re-enactment of the times they'd had and the people they'd once been. The following mornings, Marlana and Hugo tiptoed around empty bottles, sticky brandy glasses, bowls filled with cigarette stubs, corks and hair grips. The children finished off what was in the glasses and rifled through the black, crinkly wafer envelopes for leftover *After Eights*. They stepped around puddles of wine, broken glass, they felt around for coins under cushions. Sometimes they even came across people hidden under fur coats or Afghan rugs. There'd be furniture upturned and pushed down one end of the room and unsteady skyscrapers of dirty plates in the kitchen waiting for Mrs P. to shake her head at on Monday mornings.

Marlana folded herself up on the banquette by the window stretching her nightdress over her knees. She imagined her mother shouldering the gate open, her hands clutching shopping bags while laughing with the mini-cab driver - the family's contract with a car company was a feature of their day-to-day lives since her mother had had her driving license taken away. That Sunday, there were few cars on the road and hardly any people. A rusty trawler lay low and liverish in the river. The houseboats whined and strained at the ropes dotted with sleepy birds. A dog walker squinted at

the bridges against the nacreous skyline. The bridges. Most people can't remember their names in order, but a London taxi driver had told Marlena that one of the first lessons taught for the 'Knowledge' was that the bridges spell CAB – *Chelsea-Albert-Battersea*.

A Saturday-night stray staggered past her house, long hair and tasselled jacket, Marlena couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. No one else had reason to wake on a Sunday in those days. It was before shops were allowed to open, before joggers were invented.

In the Villiers' household, Sundays were bracketed off from the rest of the week because they were *Nanny's Day Off*. Even before Marlena had been born, a nanny had been hired to furnish and prepare the nursery – all except for the vanity dressing table that Virginia-Belle had insisted was essential for every *Growing Gal*.

Di-Di had stayed with them for five years, which saw the birth of Hugo and Marlena's first days at the Lycée Français, South Kensington. Under Di-Di was a collection of chattering Spanish cleaners, cooks and housemaids that Virginia-Belle had imported from her *Madrid days*. Gradually they left – sick mothers, grotty British climate and so on – and then Di-Di handed in her resignation to marry a marine. Even after all her years in therapy, Marlena still can't bring herself to talk about the day she was Di-Di's bridesmaid and had to have three of Stan's officers drag her, feet first, from the wedding car because she couldn't bear to see Di-Di leave. Her mother said she'd ruined the wedding and that it had been *Frightfully Funny*.

Then nannies stopped *Being what they Used to Be*. They were referred to as *Au Pairs*. They were hormonal, drove up the phone bill but could *Make you Come like a Train*, Marlena had overheard her Godfather tell the other men over cigars one night.

There were so many it became a game to list them, like the conveyor belt of prizes that passed you by on the *Generation Game: Bye-Bye Di-Di; Mad-Bad Maureen; The Filipina Sisters* - who caught mice in milk bottles which they displayed on the playroom's toy shelves until they starved to death or drowned in urine. *Anna Tragika*, the Polish girl who got pregnant by the man Virginia-Belle had paid to marry her for her visa. There was *Sleepy-Eyed Susan, Sneaky Sarah, Elsa the Stink, Weepy Wendy; Kojak*: the one with a fetish for bald-men; then *Pontiff the Thief* who was sent to Holloway for stealing Virginia-Belle's *Cartier* watch and, *The One who Played With Hugo's Willy*. Most didn't stay long enough to warrant a name and in the rush to replace them, the Villiers never got the hang of vetting, though, to her credit, Virginia-Belle became well-instructed at organising last-minute abortions. Mr Villiers said they all left because Marlena and Hugo were *Such Terrible Children*.

At the time Marlena's mother had vanished, they had a girl from a Franco-African colony, *For the Children's French*. Abebi was tall, slender, haughty. She wrapped sheaths of colourful material around her head and spoke no English. Whenever Mr Villiers requested she do something – being the only adult who spoke French in the house – she'd stomp upstairs swatting at the children and crying, *In my Village, I am a Princess!* A notion they found very funny as she ate with her hands and soaked her feet in the *bidet*. But she left them alone, which was key to a nanny's longevity; in fact, it was Marlena who had to get her out of their father's bed every morning to ask her to make their breakfast.

Sundays, Marlena and her brother knew to keep out of the way like backstage hands. It was Amateur Night, it was Open Season, it was like when the teacher is called out of the room during a test. The volume was either blasting at the highest notch or sizzling in a compressed, safety-catch-off silence. Marlena drew pictures for her mother with her treasured tin of *Swiss-Made* felt-tip pens while Hugo stayed in his room imagining that his wallpaper was a panel of buttons on a rocket coursing through space. A memory Marlena would hear over and over again during *Family Meetings* in Hugo's various rehab centres – so many, Marlena had suggested he write a guide book on detox units.

Marlena stared at the oil painting Whistler had done of their house a hundred years before in the hope that the artist might have given something away. Her feet were cold, pitted by the coconut-

matting floor. She bent right down and put her fingers up to the radiator grill and peered through. She could make out the original floorboards, the black cords of dust and fur-lined pipes. She listened out for Moonglow, the hamster she'd dropped near there a week before and who'd made a break for freedom faster than she could catch him. There was no Moonglow, and no mother.

Marlena straightened up and, rubbing her hands over her legs, saw her face cut out and repeated in all the mirrored facets of the three-tiered drinks' cabinet. All three shelves were covered with crystal decanters and bottles of riveting colours. Marlena opened a silver cigarette box, smelt the tobacco-infused cedar. She moved to a nut jar in the shape of a squirrel, tipped back his brass head and took out a Brazil nut. Marlena bit into it with her milk teeth. Bitter, scratchy on her tongue, she spat bits out on the carpet.

Marlena did a double head-roll over the sofa and found herself on the other side of the room. More shelves of things, stuff her mother had collected on her travels, looting, partying, finding love, losing love and a little bit of modelling here and there. Some of the curios were her father's, the few pieces that had escaped being sold or lost on the Black Jack tables by former, profligate Villiers heirs.

Everything that drew Marlena's attention that morning chiselled and shaped the art historian she would later become. For the next few years Marlena will suffer. As a teenager she will go very wrong. A course at Sotheby's and an affair with her married tutor will harness her rage. In her thirties she will make a last-ditch attempt to find someone to have children with before a secret that she'd hidden – even from herself – that family life was an anathema to her – becomes a perfectly-acceptable life choice. Today, in her late forties, she's paid well to identify and value *objets d'art*. She lives between Marylebone and Manhattan and speaks in a soft, authoritative trans-Atlantic accent. On weekends, she reads, walks, sometimes takes the Eurostar to Paris to be naked in the arms of a young picture restorer. But most often she's in libraries examining old letters and faded documents. This year, for the first time, she's had to look at them through reading glasses. Marlena received an advance for a book on John Ruskin and there's talk of a TV series. July and August, she always takes the same house in Martha's Vineyard with the same friends. She travels with a watercolour set and each visit paints a scene which she hangs on the walls of her office. It has taken Marlena decades to learn that contentedness is liking where you live, having a few battered-with-use friends and assuming just enough responsibility to value time without it.

Marlena thought she could hear Moonglow rustling on the other side of the wall, but she didn't need this to remind her that her mother was also missing. The night before, her father had come up to kiss them goodnight and said something about going on a boat trip with his 'friend' – *You remember Susie, the Nice lady with the Jack Russell? We might see if she's about, what? As if life without her mother wasn't different enough, a family outing?*

Standing beside the marble fireplace, Marlena scraped the corner of an invitation under her thumbnail: *Virginia-Belle and Martin Villiers Esq. are cordially invited...* Marlena called her parents *Mummy* and *Daddy* but they had other names: *Darling, Diddles, Sir* and *Madam, The Virge* and *Martini Bianco!* And then what Virginia-Belle and her friends called her father when he wasn't in the house, *Mart the Fart*, which had been abbreviated to *Fart*, and more recently, just the sound of a fart had them snorting with laughter. Alone with Marlena, Virginia-Belle was more elaborate on the subject of her husband and her list of obscenities could extend into paragraphs. Marlena's father, however, only referred to his wife as, *She*. *'She' hasn't come out of the bedroom for three days now... Y'know, 'She' can't even boil an egg...*

Marlena stroked the paws of an eighteenth-century bronze candlestick in the shape of a griffin. She dared herself to leave her little finger inside its beak. This composite creature, fusion of king of beasts and king of birds, will appear again, later in her life. Thirty years from that Sunday morning, on another Sunday morning, on the other side of the world, Marlena is going to telephone her father at his apartment in Cannes to tell him that Hugo has died from a heroin overdose. *Daddy, I'm afraid I've some very sad news. It's Hugo...* There were a few seconds' silence during which

they absorbed the inevitable end of a boy who'd never really begun. She wondered if she had to repeat herself before Martin said, *Ah, I see. Yes, that is bad news*, in that strangulated, treble tone some old people speak with, though maybe he really was shocked. *Tragic. Drugs, I s'pose?* Marlena heard the familiar sound of her father tapping his pipe against his teeth, a seagull wheezing over the Mediterranean and then the crunch and hiss of dry tobacco under a flame. *Well, I imagine he got in with a rotten crowd*. This was about the limit of her father's psychological insight into his thirty-five-year-old son's death. It was what he'd always come up with when Hugo was due in court or setting off for the *This-will-be-the-absolute-last-time-recovery-facility*. Marlena clenched up, rigid with irritation at her father's refusal to consider any kind of life outside lunches with old Etonians and the shape of girls' legs. Martin coughed and asked, *I s'pose your Mother's with you?* Virginia-Belle had, the night before, flown in from London and checked into the Carlyle, swigging from the airplane's miniatures and clinging to a Macedonian taxi driver who was carrying her Louis Vuitton travel bag which rattled with every kind of sedative. *She's here, yes. Frank E Campbell's are organising a small service at the end of the week*. And for just a minute there, Marlena allowed herself to long for a father, not *her* father. Martin cleared his throat and mumbled, *I don't s'pose you managed to get hold of Archie? Or the Leightons. Oh, and do call Pauline and Charles, they're always such fun*. Marlena had already instructed *Campbell's* not to bother with more than a dozen chairs, she wasn't going to depress herself by ringing round to rally a congregation. Hugo's years of burgling relatives' houses or selling other people's secrets to the tabloids had left most of their friends pretty reluctant to change their weekend plans for his premature funeral. Her father muddled through his excuses, *Next week's rather tricky...damn Tenants' Association wotsit...* Marlena wouldn't hear from her father again until she next rang to be filled in on the injustices of French tax laws or the distinguishing qualities of his latest girlfriend. But just before she put down the phone, Martin stalled her, *I don't s'pose you by any chance came across that candlestick, the bronze? A Griffin? Hugo got hold of it, but it was mine, y'see. Wouldn't mind having that back...was my father's, y'know. Was always rather fond of that piece. Anyway, m'dear, if you do happen to see it...*

Sunlight on the river. Lucent flecks hovered mid-air. Cold feet and cortisol high. Later Marlena would ask herself if she were really looking to find her mother, or to make sure she was really lost. Since her mother had gone, the house was calm, orderly, meals were served - at meal-times even - and their father had taken to reading them Oscar Wilde's short stories before they followed Abebi's pastel-pink soles up the stairs to bed. They slept. All night. No waking to the sound of slamming doors. No arguments, no panicked last-minute-*Sharp Eyes*-looking for things while taxi drivers held down the doorbell begging them to come down before he got a parking ticket. There was no shouting from one staircase to another, no Carly Simon singing *It's Too Late Baby* over and over again on a scratched record while her mother wailed into the early hours. The phone was silent. No smoky rooms. No boxes of empties lining the corridors and Virginia-Belle's girlfriends dropping by and talking, talking, talking. Hugo and Marlena hadn't set off for school having to work out what must have gone on the night before, like the time they found Mummy's tooth stuck in the stair carpet, or when they'd had to step over their father on the doorstep. And then, even talk of a day trip. Wherever she'd gone, her mother had taken her chaos with her. And left a daddy.

Marlena, slid the weighty griffin into the brightest banner of light to see the silhouette of its wingspan projected against the white wall on the other side of the room. Hugo saw it too and shot into the crux of the armchair where he'd been coiled up watching *Songs of Praise*.

*Frosties in a minute*, Marlena said.

Marlena sat at her mother's desk. Anarchy in rosewood. The musky blend of resin, envelope glue and her mother's *Vent Vert* perfume. The centre drawer opened to the usual scramble of loose rubber bands and staples, bank notes from foreign currencies long withdrawn, *Smythson's* letter-headed notepaper with their matching envelopes and foil from cigarette packs. She saw Virginia-

Belle's standard note to the local off-licence authorising Marlana to pick up two bottles of Jameson Irish Whiskey and forty *Rothmans*'s. She closed it and started searching in the small drawers. They were mostly jammed shut from the years of built-up, unopened letters inside; Virginia-Belle never opened anything in a manila envelope or sent by Second Class mail. Marlana passed her fingers over matchboxes collected from bars and restaurants from around the world, poker chips, chequebook stubs, emery boards, buttons, birthday candles, reams of Co-Op stamps and a passport-sized photo of their dog wearing sunglasses.

Marlana would surprise her mother with a tidy desk for when she returned from *Just Away-for-a-While*.

It didn't take long. Address book by the telephone with a pen that worked. A pad for note-making with a sharpened pencil. Ashtray and lighter. She visualised herself explaining the order of it all, step by step, as a teacher might a retarded pupil: pens here, blank paper, stamps. Red bills on this side and carbon-copy paper here. Marlana fanned out the invitations to be RSVP-ed, in date order, and then, picking up speed, went onto what looked like more formal correspondence. Columns of numbers from the *Chase Manhattan Bank* and invoices from *Peter Jones*. There was a large, heavy envelope which Marlana rushed to hoping for another glossy catalogue. She used the ivory letter-opener to saw through the top. Marlana pulled out the wad of documents and after a few lines, learnt that Virginia-Belle had another name, *The Plaintiff*.

Her father, *The Defendant*.

Marlana had only just started to read without stuttering or tiring, she would have put it all back but on the third page, typed out in bold and written almost like a story, was her name, her brother's name, and the events which lead to her mother's disappearance.

It started like a story. On the fourteenth of May, 1978, Martin Francis Wentworth Villiers returned to the marital home, 102 Cheyne Walk, SW3, from The Clermont Club, Berkeley Square, SW1, where he had won a sum of money on the tables, enough to tell his wife he was leaving his city job and moving to Antigua with some *Jolly fun people* he'd just met that night. Virginia-Belle Villiers was *Distressed* by this. It was *Impossible!* She and the children were going to Houston to see her family as soon as school broke up. Mr Villiers said he refused to have his children around her *Herd of hill-billy-half-wits* and that Caribbean education would *Damn well give those children the discipline they needed*. Virginia-Belle Villiers admitted slapping the right-hand side of his face with her open hand causing his spectacles to fall to the ground. Martin Villiers then -

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- seeing the blood coming from her nose, Mrs Villiers threatened to tell her husband's father just what a *Drunken bully* Martin Villiers was. He pushed her against the edge of the kitchen work surface. She slipped, hit her head on the corner while he kicked her several times after she fell to the floor -

Marlana looked up from the pages to the black larynx-hole at the top of the stairs and back again. There was an inserted paragraph from a Dr Cardwell, St George's Hospital, London, SW17, listing a fractured hip, broken ribs, right eye requiring 5 stitches, nose to be reset. Attached by a paper clip were two medical reports, receipts of some kind and X-rays -

She held them up to the light.

Mummy's bones.

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- he trod on my stomach to pour himself a drink. I caught onto his leg, tried to drag myself up, I said, 'Martin, please. Please, please don't let the children find me like this.' But he just walked out and turned off the lights. Thank God it was Abebi KADOKA who came down first and called the ambulance.

The last page closed her mother's statement with Virginia-Belle's loopy, convent-girl-educated scrawl swerving out of the rectangle provided. The officer-on-duty printed and signed his name, rank, date and time.

Marlena re-read that part again, the one about her mother begging her father to help her up. She saw her and her brother's names – even middle names – ages – even months – printed. Marlena crammed the documents back in the envelope but the corner of the X-ray sliced through the side. Trying again, the gash widened. Marlena opened the bottom drawer and thrust the package under a pile of drawings she'd done for her mother. She tipped the pen holder over, scattered the invitations, letters and bills and sprinkled a few elastic bands over the top.

Hugo was standing in front of his sister, his stomach rumbling. Her brother's pyjamas were always too small for him and there was a permanent wedge of blood filling a crack in the centre of his bottom lip. The pointed nose of a Concorde model peaked out from his top pocket. He sniffed and said, *Daddy said we're going to the Tower of London. On a Boat.*

They took the London-city cruise from Embankment to Tower Bridge. Heat and crowds, tourists and families. Marlena remembered the weight of her father's hand on her shoulder as he pointed out landmarks. There was a restaurant below deck, stiff white napkins, rumbling dessert trolley and rows of silver knives and forks on which their father gave them exasperated instructions. It was all for Susie's benefit. When he admired her earrings, touched her lobes and trailed his fingers along her neck, Marlena thought about her mother, alone on the kitchen floor, alone on a hospital bed.

Susie carried the afternoon by telling them stories about beheadings, implacable fires, boils and disposable queens. She bent down to their eye level, encouraged them to imagine the ships coming into London from the other side of the world piled high with jewels, tobacco and slaves, animals and plants they didn't even have words for. Her father and Susie held hands while Marlena and her brother were bought a 99-ice cream each and challenged to count the ravens. Later that afternoon, back at Susie's shockingly-messy Pimlico studio, the children were sent out to walk the Jack Russell so the other two could have some *Grown-up* time together.

Marlena found the griffin candlestick propping up the window to the fire escape in Hugo's rent-controlled room on 93<sup>rd</sup> Street. Nothing else was familiar where the DOA had been shooting up while playing on his Xbox 360. She took it from there back to London where it sits on her writing desk keeping its aquiline watch over her safety. The griffin, the guardian of treasures and keeper of secrets.

Ruby Soames is a lecturer in the Sociology of Education. She lives in France with her journalist husband and two children. She studied English and Theology at Bristol University and, after teaching English in inner-city comprehensives, did an MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. In 2011, her first novel, *Seven Days to Tell You*, was published as a result of the Hookline Novel Competition, it was also shortlisted for the People's Book Prize, 2013. Her second novel, *Mothers, Fathers and Lovers*, was published in 2014. She is currently working on a third novel while doing an MSc in Psychology. *The Griffin* was inspired while reading about developmental psychology and wondering how much incidents in childhood influence choices made in later life. It's also an exploration of the emotional value of objects and how they feature in our personal histories. Ruby has had poems, articles and short stories published over the years with stories shortlisted for the Ink Tears Competition and the Fish Prize. For further information, visit her website on [www.rubysoames.com](http://www.rubysoames.com).