### Life on Mars

**by** gabolange

**Summary**

Five conversations Gill Murray may have had at the pub in the middle of the afternoon.

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1.

It figures that her first few days on the MIT, everything would go to shit. The first day was fine, in its own way—paperwork and briefings. But now it’s her fifth day, consecutive, sleepless, with one change of clothes in a hundred hours. She might be drawing the attention of the other mid-afternoon patrons of the bar, but Gill can’t bring herself to care.

Her first week, all shit. She knows, knows completely, that David John Stephens raped and murdered that little girl, that child, eleven years old and left to die after being torn all up to pieces inside by a maniac. But they can’t prove it, she can’t prove it. There has to be evidence, because no one is that good, but she hasn’t found it and her sergeant sent her home with a look she’s learned well in a hundred hours: *sod off, girl.*

There’s no room for women at the MIT, and the boys make it clear. They’re no better than David John Stevens—no, they’re better, but only a bit, still thinking with their dicks instead of their brains. It didn’t take a short week on the force for Gill to know that men’s dicks do too much trouble for the men to be worth it.

That’s unfair, probably, but just as she’s drinking, taking a sip, someone smacks her on the shoulder—and now she’s coughing, since the wine went up her nose and down the back of her throat. She sputters cheap red, grabbing for a hankie.

“What?” It’s inelegant, that’s for sure, with wine dripping down her face like she’s got a bloody nose. Gill turns; there’s another woman there, another cop from the looks of it, maybe two years older, maybe ten.
“Don’t let them get to you,” the other cop says, again knocking her hand against Gill’s shoulder.

Gill snorts. She’d like to say it’s not that, but it is. It’s all of them, men, every one of them. David John Stephens and her bloody sergeant and probably her DCI, too. They don’t know what to do with her, they don’t know what to do with girls, so they taunt and tease and sometimes take it too far.

The woman sits down at next to her at the long bar, spares a sidelong glance. “It doesn’t work.” She reaches out, pulls the wine bottle away from Gill and looks at it. “You let them get to you, they win.”

“It’s not that easy,” Gill says, reaching for the bottle. The other woman has left it just out of her reach.

“Of course it’s not easy,” the other woman says. “But if you’re better than they are, smarter than they are, every day—that’s how you win.” She glances around at the pub, the dingy lighting and the man behind the bar, trying not to stare.

Gill peers at the other woman. “DC Gill Murray,” she says finally, unwinding her fingers from the wineglass to offer a hand.

“I know,” the other cop says, shaking with some force. “DC Julie Dodson.”

“Do you always smack people you don’t know to get their attention?”

“Just the good ones,” DC Julie Dodson says.

Gill snorts again, no more elegant than the last time. “Okay, Slap,” she says, and the alcohol and sleep combine in a haze that make the nickname sound like a great idea, even though she doesn’t know this woman from Adam. Or Eve. “Help me crack this case.”


Gill wants to object; that’s no way to be better than the rest.

Julie gives her a glare that might be friendly; Gill can’t really tell. “What, you think the murderers or the bosses will take you seriously starving and exhausted and smelling like booze?”

Julie mostly manhandles her out of the pub and into a taxi that Gill probably can’t afford. “See you tomorrow, Gill Murray,” Julie says.

When Gill wakes up the next morning, she still stinks of booze and has a wicked headache, but—there’s a thought there, something the neighbor boy said about the trash runs, and maybe, just maybe the second hundred hours will be better than the first. And then she probably owes Julie Dodson a drink.

ii.

“Taisie just worships Rachel,” Janet says into her wine. Gill would not say that Janet is sulking, because Janet doesn’t sulk, but if Janet sulked, Gill might say that Janet is sulking.

“Rachel?” Gill responds, because Janet seems to think the idea is incredulous and Gill is not necessarily going to disagree. Out loud.

“Rachel,” Janet confirms, shrugging a little bit. “I think when I was that age, I was madly in love with Duran Duran.”


“Oh, no,” Gill says, wrinkling her nose.

“Oh, yes.” Janet smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I don’t know how to explain to Taisie that she shouldn’t want to grow up to be like Rachel.”

Gill shrugs. “Shouldn’t she?”

“Oh, I don’t know. When I was Rachel’s age I had a job and a husband and a kid.”

“Boring and respectable isn’t exciting to a 13-year-old,” Gill says. She swirls her wine rather than sip it. “Rachel is beautiful and smart and has to beat the men off with a billy club. So much more interesting.”

“And heartbreaking,” Janet says. “Taisie is going to find out, one of these days, that Rachel is a mess of a human being and it’s going to just destroy her.”

Gill reaches for a nut, pops it into her mouth, and chews before responding. “Probably.” She shrugs. “But she’s a mess of a human being who is a damn fine police officer.” Gill picks up her wine, gestures idly with it. “Taisie probably likes her because she’s a pain in the ass.”

Janet almost laughs at that. “All drama, all the time.”

“Right,” Gill says. “But all drama and a job and a boyfriend and a life. Gets by on her wits alone.”

“It would be easier if she was into boys,” Janet says, but she’s finally smiling.

Gill laughs at that. “Boys are nothing but trouble,” she says, tone light.

“Isn’t that the truth,” Janet says, raising her glass. Gill clinks with Janet, then takes a sip, beginning to get lost in thought. They sit like that for a minute, or ten, maybe remembering the boys they loved before they grew up. Never remembering the women they worshiped, because, Gill thinks, there weren’t enough of them to respect. She did not want to be Margaret Thatcher when she was Taisie’s age.

Janet’s voice breaks Gill’s reverie. “She wants to be you when she grows up,” Janet says.

“Who, Taisie?” Gill says, the idea too absurd to contemplate.

“No,” Janet says. “Rachel.” Janet smiles, shrugs. “But you’re not to tell her I said that.”

Gill raises her eyebrows, letting it go, not responding. She’s flattered, just a little bit, because Rachel is better than Gill was at that age. And, she thinks, no more or less of a mess. A different mess. “Better me than Margaret Thatcher.”

Janet doesn’t quite get it, but won’t take this any farther, out of respect for Rachel’s confidence, or Taisie’s, or the dreams of young women that haven’t yet been knocked too far down. “Or John Taylor.”

“I never said I wanted to be John Taylor!” Gill says, and the mood is restored. She takes a bigger sip of her wine, letting the familiar taste seep in. “She’s a good kid,” Gill says, maybe more gently than she means to.
“She is,” Janet says, and after that they sit together in silence.

iii.

The whole group is out together to celebrate Gill’s return to the office. It feels weird, knocking off in the middle of the afternoon, but the superintendent had given them the nod for one day, content to let the second shift cover just once. Gill has been sitting at the bar, mostly watching.

Janet flirts with the new sergeant, in fun. The boys drink and josh and they are all happy to be together, alive and well.

And there is Rachel, sliding up to Gill’s table like she might not have the right, even though it was only a few days ago that Rachel sat on Gill’s bed and took a joke and laughed.

Gill doesn’t say anything. Rachel doesn’t like quiet and Rachel will fill the space.

It doesn’t take long. “Hiya boss,” Rachel says. Gill tilts her glass in greeting.

“I don’t know if I’m overstepping when I say this, but I wanted to say it. Just. We—I—we don’t respect you any less because Helen was charged. If that was a mistake. We don’t think it was a mistake.”

“It was a mistake,” Gill says.

“Maybe,” Rachel says, still a little nervous, though after everything, Gill thinks that will shake off soon. The vestiges of the last year or two will shake off and Rachel will come through the other side.

“I heard you were the one who figured it out,” Gill says. “That it was Helen Bartlet.”

“Ah, yeah,” Rachel says.

“Good work,” Gill says, because Rachel still needs to hear that from her, still needs Gill’s approbation. She almost laughs at herself; big words in the afternoon, aided by wine and death in the backseat of a car she will never see again. Helped along by this beautiful, brilliant woman who is still looking to her for approval and support, who still believes she is qualified to give it.

“It’s just maybe it was wrong and maybe it wasn’t, but we all make mistakes and we don’t think any less of you because you’re human too.” A look passes over Rachel’s face like that was something she wasn’t supposed to say, and she wouldn’t be wrong. “Sorry.”

For Rachel to be giving advice on making mistakes—well, perhaps she’s the one, isn’t she? All mistakes and so few successes, still putting one foot ahead of the other. And yet. Gill takes a breath. “What you have to remember, kid, is that in this line of work, when you make mistakes, people suffer. Sometimes the wrong people. It’s why I push you so hard, because you have to be absolutely sure, as much as you can, that the evidence and the paperwork and the interviews and everything are dead on. Because if it isn’t, if we screw up even the least bit, people feel the consequences.”

Rachel looks taken aback, but her mouth sets into a firm line. “Yeah, she says. “But when we do right, we make the world a little bit safer and a little bit better.” Rachel shuffles her feet, looking like she wants to say something else before deciding otherwise. “Okay, that’s what I wanted to say, so.” She nods her head back toward Janet and Mitch and the gang.

“Okay,” Gill says.
Rachel shoves her hands into her pockets. “I’m really glad you’re okay, boss,” she says.

Gill nods. Me too, she thinks, as Rachel takes a few steps and rejoins the impromptu party. She’s glad she’s okay. She’s not glad it happened. She made a mistake that she didn’t even know she was making.

Better next time. Always better next time. Gill scoops up her glass and follows Rachel to the group, just in time to hear them explode in laughter at a joke she will never hear.

iv.

They had stepped out for some air and found themselves at the Grapes. It isn’t like Gill to take a break in the middle of the day, let alone at a pub, but these days they are all willing to excuse her for a minute or ten or more, if she needs it. They don’t order anything, just sit. Gill wishes she still smoked, and thinks Janet might be thinking the same thing.

She asks Janet the question that’s been at the tip of her tongue. “So, you forgave her?”

Janet shrugs. “I had to.”

“No really, you didn’t have to.” Gill shrugs. “You have to work with her and put up with her shit, but you didn’t have to forgive her.”

Janet’s face twists up in something that’s trying to be a smile. “It’s not really about forgiveness,” Janet says after a minute.

“No?”

“No,” Janet says, shaking her head a little. “It’s about the circumstances. And recognizing that we both screwed up—everything that led to it, some of it was her fault, sure, but some of it was just life being shitty and no one knowing what to do about it.”

“You’re not just talking about you and Rachel,” Gill says.

Janet raises her eyebrows, tilts her head. An admission, maybe. It’s what makes her such a good interrogator, the reason she’s the first person Gill sends in. Janet can talk about seven things at once and mean all of them.

“You don’t have to forgive her,” Janet says.

“I don’t want to forgive Helen,” Gill says. “I want to help her, to go back in time and make a different decision so that we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“We couldn’t have known it would turn out like this.”

“No,” Gill says. “Wouldn’t that be great.”

“Might put us out of business,” Janet says. “Crack investigators who can stop crime before it happens.”

“You’ve been watching too much telly,” Gill says.


“I’d have pegged her for Coronation Street,” Gill says.

“That too.”
They sit in silence for a moment, the sounds of the pub in mid-afternoon resonating around them.

“Back to work, then?” Gill asks.

“Yes,” Janet says.

They rise to leave, fumbling with the stools at the high top. “You two are okay?” Gill asks as she swings her jacket over her arm.

“I think we are,” Janet says. “I really think we are.”

It’s not something they’ve done before, gone out just the women, at least not like this. Gill knows Rachel is still a little bit intimidated by Julie, but hell, there are days that Gill is a little bit intimidated by Julie. Sometimes it’s best to know what your friends are capable of.

It’s a little early for this, but it’s the first time since, well, everything, that they’ve all been in one place at one time. It’s quiet.

“I’m taking my sergeant’s exam next Thursday,” Rachel says, apropos of nothing.

“You’ll turn up this time?” Gill asks.

“Yes ma’am!” Rachel says, and the ice is broken a little as they shift from their daytime roles of bosses and detectives into something that isn’t yet defined. Maybe they will all be friends, the four of them, one day.

“My sergeant’s exam was a complete shit-show,” Julie says. Gill remembers that, barely. Julie had passed, of course, but not with the high marks she’d planned on. They’d gone out and gotten pissed afterwards, but in the end it didn’t matter—the department was desperate to show that it could advance women and Julie got the job and then some.

“No,” Janet says with an incredulous tone, though she knows the story. It’s for effect, some of this storytelling, a way to tell Rachel that she belongs now.

“You have no idea,” Julie says. “Me in my skirtsuit and all these blokes side-eyeing me like they thought I was there to distract them.”

Rachel snorts into her drink. “Did you kill any of them and make it look like an accident?”

“No,” Julie says. “But I could’ve.”

“Who do you think taught me?” Gill asks and they laugh together.

“My sergeant’s exam was entirely unremarkable,” Janet says primly.

“And now you make googly eyes at our 20-year-old sergeant,” Rachel remarks, glancing toward the door as if Rob is going to walk in the door and overhear them any second.

“As if,” Janet says, but she blushes just faintly. “He’s cute.”

“And he’s your boss,” Gill says.

Rachel makes a face. “I probably owe him an apology. For that thing with the report.”
Janet waves a hand. “He’s forgotten it by now.”

Julie leans forward. “Are we going to sit and talk about work all afternoon? Because if we are, I could go back to the office and get paid for it.”

Gill smacks her hands against the table. “Right, no more of that. Rachel, you’re the interesting one. Any new beaus?”

“God no,” Rachel says, twisting her face up. “Maybe a bit of celibacy for me.”

“You’ll last a week,” Janet says.

“Two,” Gill says.

“Place your bets!” Julie interjects and they are off, pulling out bills as Rachel turns redder and redder, insisting that she can go for more than a week—at least a week—without doing something inappropriate. Before they are done, Julie has forty quid in her hand and is folding the bills into her pocketbook.

“No, really,” Rachel says. “Maybe it’ll be good for me to just focus on work and hang out with Janet and the girls and figure out what I want. Take my exam and really pay attention to it.”

“You’ll do great, you know,” Gill says, and means it.

“Thanks,” Rachel says. There’s a brief quiet at the table that Rachel cannot abide, because she says, “What, while I’m studying, you all will be on holiday?”

Julie smiles. “Hardly. The paperwork, the meetings. You have so much to look forward to.”

“I thought we weren’t going to talk about work?” Janet says.

“What else is there?” Gill asks.

“Tell us about Sammy’s wedding!” Rachel is the one who wants to know.

Gill’s son is about to have in-laws. Rachel is going to swear off men forever. Janet is going to go home to her mother and her girls, and Rachel might go, too, for a lemonade and a night in a soft bed with people who love her more than they should. Julie will go back to work after this, unless she heads back with Gill for a nightcap and to check on the fading bruises on Gill’s neck.

Before that, though, Gill says, “I had no idea the damn vicar would be so bloody expensive,” and they laugh in the fading afternoon light.

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