

I

Terri was so close to the wall of her son's school that she felt the baking heat on the bricks biting into her face. Her scalp was crawling with little beads of sweat which bloomed and ran down to her ears and neck.

It was worth the trouble if she could get to the gate without that hateful woman seeing her.

She moved into the shadow cast by a fountainous spray of leaves from one of the school's ornamental trees, and immediately the damp patch on the linen sunflower smock she wore felt cool between her shoulder blades. Ten more feet and she'd be past her neighbour; twenty and she'd be on the other side of the corner, safe.

'Woo-oo, Terri! Terri, is that you?' The piping voice cooed like a minister's wife; part darling, part busy-body

Terri froze, shoulders rising up towards her ears in some strange childish response to being caught.

‘I *thought* that was you. I would have given you a lift!’ Hilary said, gesturing a slack hand to the school.

They stood in the shadow of their children’s towering school making smalltalk as they waited. She didn’t know why Hilary bothered: she’d made it clear that she didn’t like her and the passive/aggressive tennis-match of conversations they had at the school gates must make Hilary uncomfortable, too. But, she insisted on keeping up this facade of friendly neighbour.

She tried to tune out as Hilary rattled on about “her James” but it wasn’t the best plan; Hilary demanded full engagement. A trilling coo of judgmental observations, statements and loaded questions poured in Terri’s direction.

I wonder if the sun that shines out of *her James’* backside bleaches his arsehole, Terri thought.

The kids drained out of the school like sand from an egg timer and Terri exhaled loudly when she saw Edgar walking sideways through the throng, dragging his red Elmo satchel along the large flagstones.

‘Oh here’s yours, now,’ Hilary said, pointing to Terri’s trundling son. ‘Doesn’t he look funny dragging his school bag like a pet?’

‘No, not really,’ she replied. She wished he wouldn’t break his things so quickly, especially now money was so tight.

‘Now, now, Terri. Remember how *special* he is.’

Terri ignored the emphasis, ‘I don’t need reminding.’

‘What’s wrong with you today? You’re really edgy.’

Two more weeks. Just two more weeks to freedom.

Edgar would be in a school outside of Amesbury, more suited for kids of his...level... and there'd be no more Hilary-Perfect-Tits to piss her off at home-time. At least at home she could avoid the woman. Now if only she could get her husband to accept the job at Balcombe Army Hospital everything would be perfect.

'I'm just anxious to get home. And sorry, Hilary, but you've not stopped going on since I got here.'

'*Going on?* It was a simple question. And excuse me for caring.'

She shouldn't escalate this. Her husband wouldn't really take her side if repercussions started at home - he thought of Hilary as more an oddity than an evil bitch who had to be destroyed.

'I'm surprised you can even hear me over your son's awesomeness.' Terri said. It was out before she could stop it.

Hilary switched, the bitchiness only ever in a light slumber.

'Terri, you have no class, you have no respect and, most importantly, you have no shame,' she said, her nose in the air, eyes not even on Terri. She was nodding and smiling at the other parents as they passed, a fixed grin pasted on her perfectly made-up face.

'I won't miss this, Hilary,' she said.

'Why do you think he does that?' Hilary asked, nodding to Terri's son. 'Walks sideways.'

Terri folded her arms. 'Now you want to pick on my eight-year-old?'

'I'm curious... and concerned - I hope the remedial school you're moving him to isn't on a busy road, he'll never see traffic walking like that.'

Edgar had now reached the gate. Terri took her son's hand and walked back the way she had come, ignoring her neighbour.

Hilary's voice chased after her, a disingenuous brightness to it that said, *we're all friends here, don't mind me*, 'Never mind, I'm sure there'll be a sign outside the school, "Slow...Children" or something,' she called and chuckled again, then added, 'Although that can't be good for his self-esteem, can it?'

'Hon, stay here a second, okay?' She rubbed Edgar's scruffy brown hair, walked back to Hilary and punched her in the face.

'What the hell were you doing? You punched a *judge's* wife in front of Christ knows how many witnesses. In the *face*.'

'Dan...'

'Do you know what she could do? Do you understand how much this could cost?'

'She was insulting our son. She was mocking us, making fun of his condition.'

'So you punched her?'

'Yes, Captain Obvious, I punched her! I punched that snaky-mouthed bitch in the mouth. I punched her because I'm sick to death of listening to her demean me. I punched her because I love our son. I punched her... I punched her because—' she began to cry and, rather than offer comfort, her husband walked out of the room. A moment later she heard the clanking thump of hardware being moved around in his upstairs study.

She hugged herself, stretching the damp linen smock

tight across her shoulder blades, and walked to the bay windows of their lounge. Along the inside of the wide ledge was a thick, rose-embroidered, cushion-seat, which she plonked herself down on. She stared at their front garden, the blowsy zinnia blooms becoming blurred impressionist splotches through her tears.

On the sloping driveway to the left was a yellow, vintage Mercedes: Hilary's beloved convertible sports car. *That pretentious bitch. I hate her. Her flouncy blonde pony tail, her cinched-in dresses, her perfect fucking make-up - For a school run! Fucking hate her!*

Tears rolled then from her chin and top lip. She caught a warped reflection in the window; shapeless, creased and damp. Stringy brown hair the colour of stewed tea stuck to her face and she wept from deep down, from her ribs, her solar plexus a twisted raisin.

Salty summer-raindrops exploded into crowns on the stained wood floor and she gazed down at them, her mind blank for a comforting while.

Two red tennis shoes and a fragile, angular white swan appeared before her eyes and she looked up to see her son's wide open face, intense grey eyes staring directly into hers, searching.

'Don't cry, mummy,' Edgar said, holding out his hand with the origami swan.

Terri smeared a shaky palm across both her cheeks and sniffed. 'Hi hon, what's this?'

'I made it for you. You can fly away when the yellow woman is mean,' he said, pointing at the Mercedes on the neighbour's drive.

Terri snorted a laugh and then again, self-consciously when a small dome of snot flexed from her nostril. 'Edgar,

honey, that's beautiful, thank you. You're such a clever sweetheart.'

'Yes.' He said and walked away, leaving her holding the swan in one hand and her own waist in the other.

At the lounge door he turned to her and made a strange pinching gesture with his hand.

'What? You're going to make an origami crab now, hon?'

He shook his head and pointed at the swan then pinched his thumb and index finger again. 'When you need to fly,' he said, and walked out.

She watched him walking sideways up the stairs and called, 'Edgar, what happened to your school bag? How did you break the strap?'

'Not broken, mummy. I needed the buckle,' he replied, as if this made it perfectly clear, and then he was gone.

She smiled and exhaled, letting both hands fall into her lap. She looked at the one holding the swan by the base and wondered how her son made his creations so three dimensional, so *substantial*.

For when you need to fly.

She pinched swan's base and almost cried out in amazement when the wings flapped.

Somewhere the phone rang. Why didn't Terri answer it, for God's sake? It trilled again and Dan flew out of the study, catching black mains cables and thinner, data ones on his hand and around his feet.

A throaty jumble of noise: 'Gaaargh!', and then, 'Ter? Hon, get the phone!'

Outside he could hear peals of summer laughter from his son and he leaned out of the study, swinging on the doorjamb so he could see the garden from the window at the end of the landing. Terri was twisting the seat of Edgar's swing round and around so that the thick orange cord corkscrewed higher and higher before doubling up in tighter reticulations. She let go and Edgar howled with laughter as the uncoiling swing spun him.

For a moment he forgot his anger at his wife, and stayed leaning out of the study.

The phone must have stopped ringing at some point because he snapped back to attention when it started up again. She hadn't taken it outside with her so she couldn't even hear it now. He kicked his tangled foot forward - too hard - and something large crashed to the floor behind him.

The bedroom - it was coming from their bedroom. He ran down the hallway landing into their room at the opposite end of the window and saw the small black phone, lying half-covered by their white duvet.

He dashed over, fell on it, snatching it as he dropped and rolled onto his back.

'HELLO?'

'Hello. Dan, is that you, squire?'

'Oh Norman, yes, hello. Was that you before? I - er - didn't hear it in time.' he said.

'No, not me. Just now, that's all.'

'Okay,' Dan said and slouched against the brown leather headboard.

There was silence on the other end.

'Well, your Honour, what can I do for you on this fine day?' he said, aiming for a tone that was more chipper than he felt.

'Ah, well, Dan...you know Hilary and I like you both very much...' It wasn't a question, but a tactful preamble of some kind. He slumped further down the headboard, melting into the bed.

'Is this about what Terri...' *Should I say 'did to Hilary' or*

'said to Hilary'? Does he know Terri punched Hilary?

'Look old chap, I don't know what goes on in a woman's mind half the time, let alone my own wife's. As long as I fill up the Merc and take my shoes off in the hall, Hilary's happy.'

Dan snuffed out a laugh; this guy was old school. If Terri heard him talking about her like that, she'd go nuclear. He wondered what Hilary would do if she knew Norman was talking about her like this. Then: *He doesn't talk to her like that. This is for my benefit.*

'Point is, they've had some kind of fracas - could be about shoes, could be about who-knows-what, Hilary's not elaborated what happened yesterday - but she's really rather upset about the whole thing. Thought she was okay but then I caught her with a sherry hours before lunch this morning, and that's just not her.'

'I did speak to Terri about it.' Dan said, 'I think she may have acted out of turn.' He propped himself up on his elbow and saw his wife throwing their son in the air and catching him. Edgar's face was radish-red, the details of his face indiscernible other than the wide mouth that screamed with delight at each throw.

'Good man, good man, thought you would have. Now. I think we can make life considerably easier for us - us gents - if Terri were to come over and just have a quick chat with Hilary. They can sort it out over here and, well... pat down whatever it is that women pat down when... oh I don't know... just have a chat and make up.'

'I'll speak to her, Norman.'

'You do that, squire,' his neighbour replied, and then added, 'I'd hate it if Hilary forced me to look at our options over this silliness.'

‘Options, Norman?’ but Norman had hung up.

Terri pulled at the lapels on her blue jacket and tried to catch her reflection in the bay window as she walked up the faultlessly clean redbrick path to her neighbours’ front door. The high heels of her expensive summer shoes clicked satisfyingly and she walked tall. How lovely to just take a sneaky step off the path and spin around a few times on her heel on the putting green front lawn. Dan’s face entered her mind at this thought and she bristled inside, thinking of his judgemental expression as he professed his “disappointment” in her.

Stop thinking like this, you idiot. Just get it over with.

She reached for the coiled spring handle of the antique-effect door chime - £12.99 in *Homemart* - and the door swung inwards with a sigh before she could pull it.

‘Terri, come in.’

Hilary beamed at her, although her eyes were shielded behind black sunglasses so huge she looked like a wasp. She stood aside to let Terri in.

‘Hi Hilary.’ she said and walked into the hallway trying to remain as upright as she had on the path, but she felt appraising eyes - even from behind the sunglasses - sweep up and down, lingering on her hair, then her nails, jacket and shoes. The smell of synthetic honeysuckle hung in the air and Terri noted several scented plug-ins all over the spotless beige lounge.

‘You look lovely, darling,’ Hilary said, looking at Terri’s shoes. ‘Would you like me to take them?’

‘My shoes?’ Should she take the hint or risk pissing

Hilary off? Risk it; ‘No, they’re fine. First time on, actually,’ she said, returning Hilary’s fixed smile.

‘So, what can I do for you?’ Hilary said with a shrug, tucking her lemon-yellow skirt under her as she sat on the white leather sofa.

Terri was relieved she hadn’t been offered a drink or anything; this would be nice and quick, ‘I came to apologise and ask if there is anything I can do.’

Hilary removed her sunglasses and glowered at Terri, ‘I don’t know, Terri, is there anything you can do? Can you make this disappear, or am I going to be stuck in the house for the next week?’

Terri put a hand over her mouth, shocked at the bruise on Hilary’s cheek. It looked like Jupiter. ‘Oh, Hilary, I am so sorry. I really didn’t mean to hit you... that hard.’

‘This hard? How about “*at all*”? I ought to have gone to the Police.’

Roses bloomed on Terri’s face as she felt an untimely laugh struggling to burst out. This situation was ridiculous. This was lip service, all of it; why apologise? She was reasonably proud of the damage she could see on Hilary’s face - and Hilary certainly didn’t want to accept the apology anyway. Not trusting herself to keep a straight face she looked at her lap and hoped the hot prickle on her face and up her spine would calm a little.

‘You’re right to go red. You should be ashamed of what you did. You hit me, in *cold blood*,’ Hilary said.

‘Cold blood? Hilary, I—’

‘Tell me why you did it. Recount to me what you did,’ Hilary carried on.

‘I don’t think that’s going to make any difference, I—’

Another interruption: ‘Indulge me, Terri. Run me

through it.'

'No, I... Hilary, I'm sorry for hitting you, but...'

'You're sorry for walking up to me and punching me in the face, unprovoked? For using undue force? For humiliating me in front of all those lovely people? The PTA, *my own son*, for God's sake!'

'Yes. Yes, I am sorry for hitting—'

'Punching.'

'Okay, *punching* you in the face.' What the hell was wrong with the woman? "recount to me what you did"? What was Hilary after?

'So, you admit you were the aggressor, that you took inappropriate action?'

I'm only here to shut Dan up. Jesus. This woman is crazy. She's actually crazy.

Terri started to feel better. Seeing Hilary act so irrationally, made her feel like she had retained some power over her; some superiority.

'Yes, Hilary, it was all my fault. I am sorry for the violence. I really am.'

They sat in silence for a moment until Terri realised that was her cue to leave. She looked around the lounge self-consciously; at the large, unframed canvas photo of stacked pebbles, the modern, recessed fireplace, the neatly placed coffee table books. 'I better go, Hilary. I've said what I came to say.'

Hilary stood silently and walked to the hallway door. If Terri'd wanted an apology herself, she wasn't going to get one.

In the minute it took her to walk home, Terri's feeling of superiority had been replaced by one of anger and, below this, unease. That stupid bitch had won. She had her apology and could now begin to lord it over Terri again, with the impression that she 'had' something on her. By the next minute the anger had become fury and she was upstairs standing in the doorway to Dan's study with her arms folded tightly.

'I hope you're happy! I did it. I apologised; I just apologised and took it on the chin so you and *Norm* can stay friends. I just said sorry to the charmed, spiteful bitch who called our son a slow-brained fool. I hope you're happy, Dan.'

'Hon...' Dan called but Terri slammed the door and left.

Dan wondered if Edgar had heard Terri's rant after she'd come back from seeing Hilary, and worried that his son would be crying. Often any kind of conflict would send Edgar into tears and it took a while to console the poor boy.

'Ed?' He called and knocked on his son's closed door.

There was no answer. No snuffles or tears, either.

He opened the door and found his son pressed against the wall holding a collection of wires and paper, and other plastic bits and pieces that looked vaguely familiar.

'Hi daddy,' Edgar said and leaned away from wall.

'What you doing there, Ed?' he said and sat on the Scooby Doo duvet set on Edgar's bed.

‘Listening,’ Edgar replied, simply and held out what looked like a curved origami witch’s hat to Dan.

He took the witch’s hat off his son, ‘That’s clever. How did you get the curves so smooth?’ He turned the little paper hat over delicately. It appeared to be made of long triangular panels and Dan couldn’t work out how his son had got the brim, which was at a 45 degree angle from the hat, so perfectly circular without scissors.

‘Folding,’ he said and placed the assorted jumble in his other hand down on to the floor with exaggerated care.

‘It’s very good. Ed, you’ve got a real talent, son,’ he said and scooped Edgar up, taking him onto his lap.

With Edgar comfortable in his arms, he smoothed his son’s scruffy hair, took the little hat and put it on his son’s head. ‘There you go - now you’re Eddy Potter!’ he said and mimed casting spells with a wand.

‘Noooo, daddy,’ Edgar laughed. His face went red as he giggled harder and harder and Dan wondered why the joke was so funny.

‘You love Harry Potter, Ed; you don’t want to be a wizard, too?’

‘No, daddy,’ his son replied, shaking his head as if talking to a small child. He took the hat carefully between his thumb and forefinger and gently inserted the tip into Dan’s ear.

Dan’s mouth dropped as he heard a conversation from the little cone;

I don’t know, Terri, is there anything you can do? Can you make this disappear, or am I going to be stuck in the house for the next week?

‘It’s an ear horn?’ Terri said later on when Dan had brought the “witch’s hat” to her in their bedroom.

‘He says it’s not finished, though.’

‘It’s so ... perfect. I think it’s finished, alright.’ Terri said. At first she’d wondered why was Dan making such a fuss of the ear horn. The flapping bird Edgar’d made her recently was much better, and he’d made some incredibly detailed dinosaurs in the past.

‘Shall we wake him?’ Dan asked, the hard rationalist gone, replaced with wide-eyed incredulous believer.

‘And do what, Dan? Ask our autistic child to explain how we can hear a conversation that took place hours ago?’

‘No, I just mean... if he says it’s not finished, what will it do when it is?’

Now she took his usual role, ‘Dan, let him sleep. There’s nothing we can do. I can’t explain it - I don’t actually think I want to - and it’s after midnight; waking him up will confuse him and make him out of sorts tomorrow.’

She pulled the light summer sheets back and climbed into bed. ‘You’re late for your shift, anyway. You can’t hang around here.’

‘I’m going,’ he said, reluctantly, picking up his scrubs from the dresser seat and leaning over to kiss her. ‘This weekend has gone too quick.’

‘Are you on a long one now?’

‘Yep. I’ll call, though.’

‘Okay, hon. Love you,’ she said to his back as he walked

out.

A short while later she heard the door shut and the soft purr of the car pulling away. Silence descended over the cul-de-sac as a gibbous moon struggled to lift its heft up. Through the adjacent wall she could hear the soft snores of her son and wondered what land he was in, what adventures, and if his dreamworld was as limited as his waking one. Then from the wall facing her she heard thumping; Norman and Hilary's headboard was banging against the shared wall. Terri rolled her eyes and slid under the sheets. Less than a minute later the intensity of the thumping increased until Norman gave a girlish bellow and the violated tranquility returned.

No wonder she's such a bitch with such a hopeless shag for a husband.

She heard the muffled padding of heavy footsteps - Norman's - and surfaced from under the covers. The little paper ear horn sat in a cone of light below the bedside lamp and she reached for it.

This time, instead of the inexplicable replay of her conversation with Hilary, she heard something altogether different:

Get up those stairs woman, the Judge finds you guilty of being ridiculously sexy. Time to pass my sentence.

She huffed out a disgusted laugh; at least the sentence would only be two minutes long.

3

Doctor Dan Fellows to reception, please. Doctor Dan Fellows to reception, please.

The sawtooth buzz of the PA zig-zagged into Dan's awareness and he woke easily, accustomed to such interruptions. He swung his legs off the couch in the faculty lounge and rubbed the back of his neck. Leaning over the out-of-town girl from Balcombe had left him with a soreness at the top of his spine and a mild headache. He'd not even found the alleged foreign body in the side of her neck and was thankful he wasn't responsible for stitching the girl up again; he'd become so tense and shaky from the unsuccessful exploration that he would've probably stitched her lips together by accident.

'Doctor Dan Fellows to reception, plea—'

'Jesus Lin, crack the whip, why don't you? I'm coming,' Dan mumbled and sprung up. As he left the lounge he

saw it was nearly three in the afternoon.

The corridor was quiet, the only other person was Kwame who was washing the floor by the entrance to Pathology, 'Good afternoon, Doctor Daniel.'

'Hey Kwams.'

He nodded at the cleaner and stepped to the side as two orderlies burst through the doors at the end of the corridor with an empty gurney.

The orderlies passed and he left the relative quiet of the corridor into the bustle of the main reception.

'What is it, Lin?' he asked the receptionist, a middle aged woman with hair like blue candy floss and a permanent smell of babies about her.

'Your wife. Call her.' she said and went back to her sudoku puzzle.

'Busy?' he asked.

She put her pencil down theatrically and smiled at him. 'Wife, Danny-boy, wife...'

He blew her a kiss and moved to the phone at the end of the reception desk. 'Why didn't she call my mobile?' he said, but Lin was already tracing invisible lines over the grid of numbers before her and shaking her head.

Terri picked up the phone before the first ring had finished, 'Dan?'

'Hi hon, sorry I—'

'Come home, Dan. Come home, now,' he held the phone away from his ear as his wife's voice shrieked out of the earpiece.

'Is Edgar okay?'

'Edgar's...fine. You have to come home before it stops. Or changes.'

'Terri, what's going on? Before what changes?'

‘Dan! It’s the ear thing he made. It’s playing back different... stuff.’

‘Hon, I can’t just leave.’

‘Lin told me your board’s clear.’

‘Yeah, but they’re low on A&E staff, hon. I might be needed there.’

‘Ten minutes, Dan! You’ll be here in ten minutes.’

He shot a look at Lin who was staring at him and tilted his head to the side, flashing his eyes. She shrugged and carried on with her puzzle.

‘Last night you said we should just forget it and now you want me to come home? Look, I’ll be done by nine, sweetheart,’ he said but she’d hung up.

‘She wants you to go home?’

‘Oh, Lin, I didn’t see you there, eavesdropping,’ he said.

She ignored this, ‘Just go. You know it’s always quiet this time of day - weekend’s over, your board’s clear.’

‘I...’

‘Go!’ she said, ‘You were resting when she called, anyway. You’ll be back within half an hour, I’m sure.’

‘Sure, unless it’s some big drama.’

‘If it is, then you should be there, anyway.’

He shook his head and ran back to the lounge patting his pockets; where the hell was his damn phone?

He’d barely come to a stop when the front door flew open. Terri stood there clutching herself, an intense frown on her face.

Dan ran up the drive to the front door, 'This better be urgent, Ter.'

She didn't reply, she just waited for him to pass her and then followed him. He walked into the lounge, raking hands through his thick brown hair and turned to face her.

She bent over, staring at the glass coffee table, 'Where is it? It was right here!'

He took her by the shoulders, 'Terri, hon, tell me what's going on. You're acting mad.'

'Edgar's ear horn. I put it right here,' she said jabbing a finger at the table. She shrugged him off and knelt down, scrabbling under the low sofa with both hands.

It was as if she was half-aware he was even there.

'Baby, baby, calm down,' he said and pulled her up to her feet. 'You have to tell me what's going on?'

They sat on the sofa and Terri recounted to him what she'd heard that morning. Edgar had come into her room early and they had chatted in bed until she got up and fixed breakfast around eight. It was a teacher-training day at school and she'd planned a lazy day for them both: she'd read in the garden on the ancient sun lounger while Edgar entertained himself on the swings, or playing with his Lego on the patio.

As she warmed Edgar's favourite cinnamon and raisin bagels he'd come in and passed her the little origami ear horn.

Mummy, listen.

Hon, I don't want you... using that anymore. Not till we know how it works (in truth I didn't want him listening to the neighbour's sex life; if it could pick that shit up, Christ knows what else it could

pick up. But he insisted and kept repeating himself).

The sideways people, mummy, the sideways people, listen, mummy, the sideways people.

‘What did he mean? “Sideways people?”’ Dan asked.

‘I have no idea, but in the end I took it off him and listened. He was getting distressed and I didn’t want it escalating.’

‘And?’

‘I don’t know what I heard. It was a squealing *lament* kind of sound. A bit like whale song, and every now and then a scream. It was almost like words but...I don’t know...Dan, I couldn’t make it out, but it was...’

‘Are you sure you didn’t hear something else, maybe some workmen or - I dunno, a plane or something?’

‘...*despair*, Dan, it was the sound of despair.’

‘Are you kidding me? I came home because you think you heard the sound of “despair” in a paper ear horn?’

She leaned forward and checked under the coffee table again, ‘That’s why I need you to listen to it. It’s not the kind of thing I can describe. Oh God, Dan, I was *terrified*! What’s going on with our son?’

‘Don’t cry, mummy,’ Edgar said, walking into the room. ‘Daddy’s here. Why are you here daddy? Why aren’t you at work?’

‘I came home, Ed, I wanted to see you and mummy.’

‘You should be at work, daddy.’

‘It’s okay, Ed. I’m going back now,’ Dan reassured his son. He didn’t want Edgar confused and unhappy with this change in expected timetable.

But Ed didn’t seem to be too bothered after all, ‘Listen, daddy,’ he said and held out the ear horn.

Dan noticed two wires - black and brown - coming from the tip were coiled around something that looked like a capital 'H'. More wires came from this H and entered a small black box with an exposed printed circuit board. Various bits and pieces hung from the PCB, also attached to wires. 'Ed, what *is* that?'

Edgar pressed the box and it emitted a familiar sound. 'Listen, daddy. Listen, mummy.'

'Ed, that's my mobile,' Dan said, recognising the button tone. 'What have you done to it?'

But before he could question his son further - or even wonder how he'd ended up with his mobile - a conversation started to come from the ear piece. It was amplified and crystal clear - it even had a spatial element, as if it were in surround sound:

I got her, Normy. I got that bitch. She admitted everything. Said it was all her fault!

You did? Clever girl. Knew you could do it.

Yep. Stupid fool didn't even have a clue. And my phone was right there, in front of her, on the coffee table recording everything she said.

You're a devious little thing, I think Judge Normy will be passing sentence on you tonight...

Edgar pressed something on Dan's cannibalised mobile and the playback stopped. Terri and Dan looked at each other, eyes widening and jaws falling slack.

'What the hell?' Dan said and called Lin from the landline to say he wouldn't be back for the rest of his shift.

There was a lot to talk about; Terri was glad Dan had called work. Their neighbours' deception was at the forefront of all this, and she found herself comforting him almost as much as talking about recent events. It hurt her to see him in so much pain as he reeled from Norman's duplicitous involvement.

However, she was more concerned with whatever contraption their son had made. Maybe it was a variation of those crystal radios, but how would he have access to that kind of knowledge? Accepting his talent for origami was one thing, but electronics? That was too much to just blithely accept. And what of the initial sound she'd heard, what Edgar had called the sideways people? Anxiety clawed around deep in her belly every time she recalled that alien sound.

'We're leaving.' Dan said, simply.

'What?'

'I'll kill him. I'll kill them both if we stay here, Terri,' he told her, and she could see the muscles in his jaw clenching, his gaze a million miles away.

'Where do you want to go, hon? To mums?'

'No, Ter. Leave. I mean move. The Balcombe job.'

The anxiety in her belly was displaced by an excited somersault, 'Are you serious?'

He picked up the landline phone from the sofa.

While he called directory enquiries, Terri went upstairs to check on Edgar. After the revelation of the recorded conversation he'd walked out, turning at the stairs and walking up them in the strange sideways manner he'd adopted more and more recently. Both she and Dan had been too stunned to have the presence of mind to get the

contraption off him and now she wanted to ask him about it.

He was sitting on the floor folding a large sheet of paper. His tongue was out and there was a darker patch on the blue carpet where saliva had fallen.

‘Hey sweetheart.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Can you sit on the bed with mummy?’

Edgar stood up, his task immediately forgotten and sat next to her on the bed. There was a soft pop and purr from his nose as he breathed through his mouth, ‘Are you angry?’

‘No darling, of course not.’

‘Is daddy angry?’

‘Edgar, we’re not angry with you.’

‘Is Mr Judge Spencer angry with me?’

‘Darling, no-one’s angry with you.’ she said and tucked some loose hair behind his ear. So he recognised the voices he’d recorded. He obviously knew something was amiss.

‘Then why is your blood talking?’ he said and, rubbed her hand.

She didn’t know what he meant, but her pulse *was* racing and for the first time in her life, she regarded him with caution.

‘I just want to ask you about the thing you made.’

‘Okay, mummy,’ he said and leaned backwards to his wooden bedside table. His goldfish tank bubbled quietly and he reached behind it. ‘Here.’

She took the strange device off him. ‘Baby, what does this do? How did you make it?’

‘I folded the paper.’

‘But what about daddy’s phone?’

‘Is daddy angry?’

‘No, I told you he wasn’t. I just want to know how you ... Did you make it? Did someone else make it for you?’

‘I made it.’

This wasn’t getting her anywhere; Edgar was searching her eyes for sense in what he must be perceiving to be nonsensical questions, or perhaps even a subtext.

‘Can I keep it, Edgar?’

He nodded with a sigh and then got down from the bed, and resumed his folding. Terri bent to kiss him and left.

When she got downstairs Dan had just got off the phone. ‘I’ve spoken to Balcombe Down - the HR bod isn’t there, but they’re calling back tomorrow. At the hospital.’

He was serious! From the horrid feeling of betrayal and violation - along with the confusion of the whole magic ear horn - she now felt elated. Had Hilary been that much of a drain on her wellbeing all these years, that the prospect - the very real prospect - of moving away from her elevated her spirits so much? Her mouth worked but she didn’t know what she wanted to say.

Dan surprised her by bursting into laughter, ‘Your face is a picture!’

‘But you hate the idea of working on that army base. You said it would be boring.’

‘How long have we lived here, Ter? Ten years? Twelve? All that time I’ve been under the dickhead impression that asshole next door was my friend. You know why I pushed you into apologising? Because *he* suggested it to me.’ Dan jabbed a finger at the wall. ‘He played the dumb old fool, and I fell for it.’

‘Well you *are* a dickhead, then. I’m your *wife*. Even if he was your friend, you should have listened to me.’

She softened as he cupped her face with slender hands, ‘I know. I should have. You *are* my wife, and Ed is my *son* and I put that old c..., that old fart before my family.’

Terri’s eyes stung as tears of relief brimmed in them and for the second time that week she cried.

‘I want you to find some estate agents tomorrow,’ he said, then pointed the finger at her, ‘and I want you to steer clear of those toxic pigs.’

4

Six weeks later, Terri stood on the drive next to Monique, their estate agent, jangling the house keys in her palm. Dan and Edgar were in the car which Dan had parked on the quiet road.

‘You have to give me them sooner or later,’ Monique smiled and took Terri’s hands in both of her own.

Terri snuffed out a little laugh, ‘Hmm. I know. Here.’

She let go of the keys as Monique took her hands away. *Done; no more Cedar Lane, no more Hilary. What will we be doing in a years’ time?*

Amongst the rush of organising the family move, Dan’s job change and familiarising herself with Balcombe, she’d been surprised at how little the bastards next door had figured in their life. It was as if the pair of them knew they’d been rumbled even though Dan had decided not to confront them about the set-up, after all.

Terri’s sister, Annabelle had come to stay with them to help out, and had gone to pick Edgar from school for the remaining two weeks so that she didn’t have to face Hilary

at the school gates. Now that Edgar was at his new school in Balcombe, Hilary made the twenty-mile round trip herself, Bel keeping her company.

She was pleased with the new family who'd be moving in soon and been honest with the young couple, telling the pregnant girlfriend that they'd not got on with the neighbours, but she didn't labour the point. She stared at their first family home: here is where Edgar had grown, where Dan had qualified, where her father had passed away and where she'd smoked her first joint. Would she miss it, or was it so infected with the bitter memory of Hilary and Norman's betrayal?

A loud chug and splutter brought her out of her reverie as the chocolate-brown removal van - *Luxfords* painted in delicate gold script along the flanks - pulled off.

'Thank you, Monique,' she said and walked down to the car. Edgar peeped through the rear window like a face lost amidst a pile of laundry and smiled.

'Ready, hon?' Dan said, leaning across the front passenger seat.

'Ready, hon,' she replied and got in.

She heard the frantic click of heels behind her and knew without turning to see that it was Hilary.

'Terri, oh, Terri, I couldn't let you go without giving you this,' she clucked as she tottered towards the car. She was holding out a fat yellow envelope. The nerve of the woman! It was obviously some shitty good-luck-on-your-move card. 'I know we've and our ups and downs—'

'Save it. You're a wicked, lying, lonely woman. I don't want anything from you,' she said and pushed Hilary's hand away.

‘Terri. I wouldn’t do that if I were you - you’re already in enough trouble as it is, I’m just trying to be the good neighbour.’ Hilary stood her ground, that fake beatific smile on her painted face. Her eyes stared into Terri’s intensely, as if daring her to blink.

‘Hilary, you have cancer in your soul. You’re the most ugly character I’ve met.’

‘Terri, I’m warning you...’ she flicked the card into the car and it landed at Terri’s feet.

Terri looked across at her husband. His knuckles were white lumps on the steering wheel but he turned to her and nodded.

‘Warning me about what, Hilary? That you have a recording of me saying I hit you? That it was my fault?’ she laughed and shook her head.

The predatory smile on Hilary’s face dissolved and she sputtered some non-words. She reached forward and Terri pushed her away reflexively, assuming she was going to hit her, but she seemed to be trying to do something else. Dan started the engine and slowly reversed.

‘Hilary, why don’t you try eating some of that make up? Then maybe you really *could* be pretty on the inside.’

They pulled away from the house and left Hilary standing at the kerb, twitching and turning to face Monique, then back to them like a meerkat.

They both erupted with laughter.

‘Cancer of the soul? That’s harsh,’ Dan said.

‘I thought she was going to hit me!’ Terri howled.

‘I think she was reaching for the card - she changed her mind.’

‘This...’ she said and reached into the footwell to retrieve the envelope. ‘...is going out the window.’

‘Wait, no, no.’ Dan said, stretching an arm across her before she could ditch the card, ‘Open it! I want to hear what she wrote!’

She tore the envelope open and froze.

‘What is it hon? What’s wrong?’

‘Dan, she’s just served me!’

Although the removals van had started out to Balcombe Down before them, they arrived at Office 109 way ahead of it. Dan slowed the car as the suburban roads became narrower and more rural, the carriageway barriers replaced by hedgerows alive with sparrows. Goldfinches fought on thistles that looked like royal crowns on sticks and Edgar cooed in delight as a pheasant barrelled down the verge ahead of the car before clattering noisily through the branches of giant beech and ash trees.

‘Hard to imagine it’s only half an hour from civilisation, huh?’ he said when he noticed his wife as wide-eyed as his son.

The day had been bright but the summer afternoon now took on an alien calico light as lavender-grey thunderheads piled up above the golden barley fields.

‘It’s so...tranquil,’ Terri said, ‘but potent, as if something’s about to happen.’

‘Something is...’ Dan said.

A screaming boom filled the air and Edgar clapped his hands over his ears.

‘Mummy! Look!’

‘Was that thunder?’ she asked and Dan raised his index finger from the steering wheel to point beyond the

windscreen as a jet tore through the sky. 'That's a bit low. Doesn't that contravene residential laws or something?'

'You got served a damages claim an hour ago and now you're worried about the law?'

'Ha ha.' she said.

'HA HA.' Edgar echoed and then clapped.

'Seriously, Dan. What's with the jet?'

Was she serious? 'Ter, it's Balcombe Down. What do you think is on the base; action men and marching grounds? It's an airfield.'

'But you always called it an army base...'

'Army base, airfield, whatever,' he said with a shrug, 'It's all the same, really.'

He drove deeper into the Wiltshire countryside, his two passengers in mute appreciation of the environment. He pointed out a couple of jets and a low-flying Hercules but they were far off on the horizon and difficult to discern against the bruised sky.

'See that clump of trees over there, Ed?' he said, looking over his shoulder at his son and pointing to a large copse at the crest of a small hill away to their left.

Edgar followed his gaze and pointed at the trees.

'Just behind there is Pumphrey Woods. That's where our new house is. There's a lake there, too. You want to go fishing?'

'No.'

'Okay, son. No fishing, then.' He pointed ahead to a break in the road on the left. A dark green sentry box with tattered shingle roof and peeling paint stood in what looked like no more than a lay-by. 'There's our driveway.'

As they neared the lay-by, a side road was revealed with

two derelict tubular steel gateposts. From one hung the remains of a chicken-wire fence.

‘We’ll have to get rid of that mess.’ Terri said as they drove through the gates onto a well-kept tarmac road.

He didn’t want to tell her that he’d missed the entrance twice in past work-visits, and on this featureless stretch of road they were the only thing highlighting the entrance. ‘Or restore them.’ he said.

The road lead up to the hill copse and down the other side into a dense patch of forest and he had to put the headlights on. After a mile the canopy opened up and what remained of the afternoon light was let in.

To the right was a fenced clearing before a sprawling flat-roofed single-story building. A sign on the fence read *Office 109: Balcombe Down: Anson/Vickers Wellington.*

‘I didn’t notice that, last time - that can go, too!’ his wife said with a snort.

‘No it can’t,’ he replied.

‘Why not?’

‘It’s the official address.’

A red land rover was sitting in the clearing next to the converted office, it belonged to the existing family; the Coles. They had two sons of similar age to Edgar, and a siberian husky that loved him, and had insisted on forming a welcome committee earlier on in the week. He’d not told Terri or Edgar as he wanted to surprise them. It would be a nice start to the new home and he figured it would be a nice orientation to the property - lubricated with alcohol, of course. Terri and Paul’s wife, Heather, had hit it off really well in the two previous visits

she'd made, and Dan had lodged with the family for a week in the previous month as he was inducted into his new role as one of the base's doctors.

'Paul and Heather are here?' she said, sitting up in her seat.

'Yep.' he said, setting the handbrake.

Terri fiddled with her seatbelt and craned her neck round to the back seat, 'You hear that, Edgar? Your friends are here.'

'The sideways people, mummy?'

Dan looked back at his son, too, 'Come on, Ed, we've talked to you about the "sideways people". These are *real* people; Isaac and Paul, remember? And Carruthers?'

Edgar shook his head, 'No, daddy, just the sideways people.'

Terri looked back to him and mouthed, 'Come on.'

The air outside the car was close and with the trees looming all around the office-house, Terri felt a sense of oppressiveness that had not been there on previous visits, but the place was so delightful and quiet she ignored it. 'Hello-oo?' she called.

They reached the concrete step of the porch and she hesitated opening the heavy, red door. 'It seems wrong to let ourselves in, Dan,' she said, half-laughing.

'It's ours, now. It belongs to us. They moved out at the beginning of the week.'

She bounced the keys in her hand, 'Okay, then,' she said and stuck the key in the lock.

But the door swung inwards before she could turn the key.

She turned to Dan, 'It's open...Heather, Paul?' she said

brightly, and walked in, bracing herself for the Coles to leap out.

The three of them walked down the hallway and into the wide open-plan living area. At the far end was a long, low pine table made from railway sleepers and adjacent to that, heading off to the left was a large island kitchen.

‘Hello?’ Paul shouted behind her, making her jump. The local news was showing on the television, and the buzzing noise from its poor reception exaggerated the quiet.

Edgar extracted himself from her hand and ran off down the hallway to the rest of the house.

‘You think they’re outside, Dan?’

He had walked to the end of the room and was looking left and right through the french windows. ‘There’s no-one on the patio,’ he said.

‘Hold on a sec,’ she said, ‘look at the table.’

Four plates with dried food were on the table. Mashed potato had shrunk and hardened into yellow granite-like lumps and gravy had dried into filmy brown clots. Some of the cutlery lay on the stained hardwood floor, some on the bench seats, and some on the table. A mug lay on its side.

Terri and Dan looked at each other.

The kitchen was more of the same; a half-filled pan with milky water and floating blooms of white mould like tiny cabbages sat on the Aga, and various utensils caked with food lay on the dirty worktop surface. Terri noticed heat coming from one of the Aga’s drawer ovens and opened it. A choking bloom of black smoke belched out

into the room. Luckily she saw no flames and she backed away to the windows and threw them open.

After the smoke cleared, she peered into the oven, 'Whatever was cooking in there, it's well and truly cremated now,' she said shaking her head. A small charnel lump the size of a golf ball sat on a round baking tray.

She could hear Dan had moved further into the house when she heard him calling out for the Coles. He returned to the kitchen, 'I can't find them,' he said.

They both walked back into the living area, 'Maybe they went out to get something,' she said, unconvinced.

'Dan, this is ridiculous. Give them a call.'

Edgar returned to the room and held her hand. 'Don't be scared, mummy,' he said.

Dan called but the phone just rang once before connecting to the voicemail service. 'No answer.'

The rumble of the removal van approached and the three of them walked out as it pulled up to the property, brakes hissing.

'Why don't we ask them?' Terri said, pointing at the huge truck, 'I got their details from Heather. She recommended them.'

A tall, sinewy man in spotless grey coveralls slunk from the high cabin and two other, heavier-built men, dropped down. Another two appeared at the back on the inside as the doors opened and platform lowered. Terri moved towards him, 'Mr Luxford?' she said.

He stopped and came towards her with a smile so broad, even his massive strawberry blond beard couldn't

hide it.

‘Nice to see there’s only one floor, Mrs Fellows! We’ll be in and out in no time!’

That was strange; she assumed they’d been to the property already to give the Coles a quote, let alone move them out earlier in the week. She remembered the lounge was still filled with all their belongings.

‘You haven’t been here yet?’ Terri asked him, aiming to sound nonchalant.

‘Nope, Mrs Fellows. We was meant to come earlier in the week but didn’t get the confirmation call from Mr or Mrs Cole,’ he said. ‘To be honest I thought we’d been replaced by another firm,’ he laughed. It was an awkward sound like a chair scraping across the floor.

‘So you’ve not heard from them?’

‘No, no. As I say. We were expecting a call from them earlier this week.’

‘What about *our* stuff? Where are we going to put it with theirs still inside?’ Dan said, running up to Terri and Luxford.

‘It’s still in there?’ Luxford said, his eyes almost disappearing under a heavy frown.

‘I’m more worried about the Coles,’ Terri said, ‘The car is there, their stuff is still in the house, and they’re nowhere to be found.’

‘Yeah but the other car isn’t here, hon - Heather’s car. Maybe they took hers.’ Dan said and Terri could detect relief in his voice, but it was the desperate kind.

‘We can hang on to your furniture. We have storage facilities.’

She looked in Dan’s eyes searching for a solution. Could they afford the storage? It was hardly ideal. What the hell

was going on with the Coles?

‘Okay, look,’ Dan said, ‘we haven’t got a choice. This is going to have to go back to their storage place. You think you can find bedclothes and stuff in that thing?’ He pointed at the van.

‘I have bedclothes, kettle and basics...clothes and stuff in the car,’ she said raising her arms then dropping them to her sides again. ‘I want to know where Paul and Heather are, though.’

‘My sister might know,’ Luxford piped up, ‘Mrs Cole and her are friends. It’s how we got the contract.’

‘Would you mind calling her and asking, please?’ Terri said.

‘They’ve gone, mummy.’ Edgar said, pulling her fingers.

‘I know sweetie, but they’ll be back. We just need to find out...’ *find out what? Where they were? When they were coming back?* She squeezed Edgar’s hand softly instead of finishing her sentence.

Terri arranged several plush, maroon patio chair cushions on the grass in the back garden. Pools of light dappled the lawn and a warm breeze stirred Edgar's hair and the paper he had brought out to make his origami models.

Five little origami yachts sailed in a cluster on the large lake, like white gulls floating back and forth in the eddying breeze. Every so often she looked up at the *splash-thwump* of the kingfisher diving for sticklebacks.

Beyond the forest - even at this distance - the golden glow of barley shone through the trees and Terri felt a moment of reward. Two weeks ago she would never have imagined her life would be so settled, so pastoral. Nothing that reached the back garden was artificial - even the sound of occasional cars (or army vehicles!) on the road beyond the copse out front didn't reach this far.

She looked at her son, 'How you getting on with those boats, Edgar?'

'I'm finished,' he said and brushed his hands together, but he reached for more paper. 'Now for the sideways

people.'

Not the sideways people again. She'd talked to Dan about it time and time again, and he'd assured her it was a common expression of creativity at his age - the fact that he was an only child made imaginary friends appealing to him. But she hadn't entirely accepted it simply because Edgar was so content with his own company.

'Sweetie, don't you think it's time to forget the sideways people?'

'Mummy, go inside now - speak to daddy,' he said and turned his attention back to the folding of his latest creation.

She leaned over to give him a playful smack for dismissing her when the phone rang. 'Stay away from the lake, hon,' she said and ran into the house to answer it.

'Hi gorgeous, it's me,' Dan said, 'Brief reprieve so I thought I'd see how you're doing. I'll be back around eleven.'

'Did you hear back from the family?'

'Yeah,' he said, breathing out heavily.

This was probably bad news. 'Well?'

'Still no sign of them. Eddie Luxford said Heather's sister is taking care of the storage invoice. Also the police have no more questions for us, thank god.'

'It's horrible. Where the hell have they got to?'

'I don't know, hon, but for now it means we can start to settle in properly.'

He seemed a bit dismissive of the missing family and she felt a flash of irritation.

'Dan...'

'Ter, I know, but what can we do?'

He was right; it was a conundrum not a tragedy; *well, at*

least not until bodies start turning up— she stopped thinking along those lines.

‘Also, I spoke to the base curator, Alfie. He told me something about the lake.’ He paused. ‘It’s pretty gruesome. You wanna hear?’

‘I don’t know. Do I?’

‘No, but I’m going to tell you anyway,’ he said, and added the flourish of a witches cackle.

‘Please don’t tell me people drowned there,’ she said.

‘No. But the lake is the flooded depression of a plag—’

His voice was obliterated by the sound of a fighter jet screaming over the hospital base. Seconds later it boomed over their house.

‘Say again.’

But there was silence on the end of the line. It was live, but her husband wasn’t talking and there was no background chatter.

‘Dan?’

She waited a moment longer to see if he would reconnect and as she was going to hang up, the squelch of radio signals howled through the ear piece. ‘Jesus!’ she said and yanked the phone from her ear.

She rubbed her ear and moved the receiver back - slowly. The noise had stopped and now she heard beeping tones and the delicate sounds of a music box. The tune sounded warped or damaged in some way and she couldn’t identify it. Maybe *Greensleeves*? No, a bit like *Boys and Girls Come Out to Play* - she couldn’t tell, and was about to hang up when she heard new, guttural sounds; isolated consonants, diphthongs and fricatives.

Interference from the Air base? A beep, a music box and that weird...what? Code? *Language*?

A sharp squeal blasted out of the receiver and she dropped it. When she picked it up again the odd sounds and music had gone, replaced with the regular dial tone.

She put the phone on the table on her way back out to the garden but another buzz stopped her. Behind her she looked into the gloom of the house, temporarily blinded from the sunny garden glare, and made her way, by sound more than sight, towards it.

The electric tin opener on the kitchen work surface was whirring away. She reached under the cupboards to switch the power off at the socket.

The flex and plug were coiled around the tin opener. It wasn't even plugged in. She stared at it, wondering if there were batteries, and picked it up to check.

The microwave pinged and its door sprung open.

Then the mirror opposite the dining table fell off the wall and smashed.

Terri screamed and ran outside to check Edgar.

Hearing her scream and the racket she made running into the back garden, Edgar dropped his latest paper project and stood up to attention.

'Edgar!' she shouted, and he came running over to her.

'What's wrong, mummy?'

Years of protecting her son from anything in the slightest bit unusual or different meant she had to handle this carefully, no matter how anxious she was. In the end she settled for a kiss and squeezed him.

'Sorry hon, did I frighten you?'

‘Who’s inside, mummy?’

‘No one is,’ she said, picking him up.

‘Who’s making the noise?’

Terri was shaking her head in mild dismissal when she heard what he was referring to. From the kitchen she could hear banging sounds. She walked with Edgar in her arms, to peek in the window, as the reflections on the window obscured the inside from this distance. Something about his composure gave her confidence, or at least a lack of concern; she felt *empowered* by him.

Above the Aga and washing machines, the cupboard doors were standing wide open. The many small cupboards around the base of the island unit were also ajar and Edgar pointed at it.

‘Hedgehog!’ he said and wriggled to be let down.

Once he had been set down, he chuckled and pulled her towards the french windows.

‘Edgar, no,’ she said, ‘don’t go in there.’

‘Yes, mummy, yes.’ *Pull, pull.* ‘Let’s say hello.’

She followed him, his nonchalance contagious.

Inside, the kitchen looked spent; even the Aga’s three heavy iron doors were open.

‘What is this?’ Terri whispered.

In response, all the doors slammed shut in unison. The red clock above the Aga flue fell off the wall and rolled away into the lounge. Terri jumped but did not scream this time.

‘I told you the sideways people are real, mummy!’ Edgar said, and pointed in a wide arc around the kitchen.

She frowned, ‘Sideways people, hon? The sideways people did this?’

He shrugged and chuckled again before running out

into the garden, entranced by something.

Terri could only move her head. She looked at Edgar running back to his patch by the lake and something Dan had started to say came to her mind; something about the *play* - No, not the “play”; he’d started telling her about the depression the lake was formed from. He’d meant *plague pit*, hadn’t he?

The lake was a filled plague pit.

She thought back to Edgar’s genial sweeping hand gesture. He wasn’t pointing at the slammed cupboards when he said the sideways people were real, was he?

He was pointing at *things*.

Dead things?

6

Dan flashed his lights at the oncoming vehicle as he descended the lee-side of the copse hill. It still had full-beams on and was going too fast for such a small country road - he considered this road his drive; apart from access to the cereal crops on either side, it had no purpose other than to lead to Office 109.

The car - he *hoped* it was just a car - was now climbing the hill and at last dimmed its beams. He wondered if it was the Coles but his night vision had been temporarily ruined in the glare and he saw nothing but afterimages as it sped by. Shaken a little, he pulled over to wait for his vision to return. Looking in the rear view mirror all he could see was a morphing lava-lamp of purple superimposed over two red squares as the car drove off.

In a few moments his night sight returned and he could make out the winking lights of the front clearing a mile away. What Terri called the *paranoid lamp* had been triggered - probably by a wild animal - and even at this distance, it illuminated a large but cosy area of the

surrounding Pumphrey Woods.

Who would be using this road at close to midnight, though? If it had been visitors, then they'd have surely stopped, realising he was the driver in this car. He moved away from the verge and carried on the short distance home. After a while the light ahead went out but came back on almost immediately. This cycle repeated until he had driven the mile towards the house at which point he could see Edgar and Terri outside, sitting on the porch steps.

He parked the car and got out, grabbing his dirty scrubs from the front passenger seat. Something fell out of them onto the floor but he ignored it when he saw the look on Terri's face.

'Hey hon, what's up? Isn't it a bit late for Ed?'

Although the night was a muggy one, he noticed she was shivering.

'Take us to Bels, Dan, I don't want to be here anymore,' she said, and walked towards him with Edgar.

'Huh?'

'Get in the car, Edgar,' she said.

'Hey, hey, Ter, hon, what's going on?' He put his arm out to gently stop Ed but his son sidestepped him and walked to the car to open one of the rear passenger doors. He clambered in awkwardly, apparently trying to get into the car in a reversal of how he would get out of it. Dan turned back to Terri.

'There's something wrong with the house, Dan,' she said, looking beyond his shoulder.

He tossed the keys onto the seat behind him and took her chin, tilting her face towards him, 'Terri, what's going on? You're shivering. Who came to see you?'

‘You know about that?’ she said, focusing on him now.

‘Yes, they were driving like maniacs on the road out of Pumphrey Woods.’

She tilted her head to the side, ‘What? I thought you meant...’

‘Terri, can we go inside? It’s after midnight - Edgar will be rotten tomorrow, and I need to sleep, too.’

‘You go in. Go in and have a look at the kitchen. Then can we go to Bels?’

The lamp went out and Dan sighed and looked up at the night sky. No stars were visible, just a hazy blackness; a dark TV screen on which someone had turned the brightness too high.

‘Okay, okay.’ He indulged her and walked to the door causing the lamp to snap on. *Oh fuck off*, he told it, *on-off-on-off, make up your fucking mind*. Just like Terri; *Amesbury - Balcombe - Amesbury; where next? Timfuktu?*

The front door was open and a small segment of light curved across the hallway floor from the cloakroom toilet. It was the only light on in the house. He walked into the lounge, his footsteps clumping loudly in the silence, and hit the light switch.

At first he thought Terri had moved the furniture round; everything had changed direction by ninety degrees but why would she move the sofa to face the wall, and the TV away from it? He moved into the dining area and noticed the large mirror was lying on the floor; one corner of the heavy wooden frame had collapsed and long shards of glass sparkled like threats on the dark wood floor.

He moved to close the french windows and kicked something. The red wall clock from the kitchen flew ahead of him and bounced out onto the patio where it

disappeared into the darkness just beyond the fan of light that spilled through.

‘For Christ’s sake...’

Out back, the dark was more complete; the milky-black sky shielded by the surrounding forest. Even the lake was invisible amidst the inky dark and as he walked further out he became disquieted. He may as well be walking into a void; nothing ahead suggested location and in the becalmed, windless night there were no wavelets making noise against the root-snaggled banks.

He turned around, needing the comfort of the house lights, disoriented and eager to stem the rising panic that gripped his chest.

The lights flicked out: utter darkness.

When something swished, moving through the ferns to his right, he spun in a wide arc. Tilting his head to the side he tried to hear it again, confounded by the singing thrum of his blood pumping through his ears. There was a *pitter-patter-crack* to his far left and he turned his head again. Nothing.

Now he wasn’t sure which way he was facing. A bitter, metallic taste flooded his mouth. He wanted to run to the house but which way was it?

‘Terri?’ he shouted. ‘Can you make the paranoid lamp come on, hon?’

No reply.

‘Terri!’

He turned slowly with fierce concentration, trying to ascertain which direction he faced. At his feet was a weak, circular greenish-blue glow, almost indiscernible, and he recognised it as the glow-in-the-dark gradations of the kitchen clock. He snatched it up and held it to his chest

like a talisman and as he stood, he saw through the trees a dim coronet of red lights; the lights that sat atop the odd tower near the airbase. That would place the house directly in front of him.

He strode in that direction with new confidence, trying not to break into a sprint when he heard the *pitter-patter-pitter-patter* of something small running *above* him.

The roof. It was on the roof?

His caution gone, he raced towards the house, desperate to be with his wife and son, panic attack - paranoia - now barely contained.

Just-a-squirrel-or-bird-just-an-animal-deerfoxbadger, his whispering mind screamed at him. Any second now he would trip up on the patio steps to the french windows. He would slam them shut from whatever...animal... stole across the roof and he would be fine.

Running at full pelt he plummeted into the lake, inhaling greasy, chalky water as he screamed.

Terri joined Edgar in the back when Dan left and seeing his keys on the front passenger seat, she started the car and put the radio on;

*Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb—*

‘Is daddy going to tell them off?’ Edgar asked.

She was too anxious to get into another discussion with Edgar about the sideways people, ‘No, hon, he’s not.’

‘Is he coming back tonight?’

‘Yes Edgar, he’ll be back in a minute.’

*And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of dogs to come—*

‘What’s on the radio, mummy?’

‘It’s just a silly play. You want me to change it?’

‘No, it’s funny.’

Although the play sounded rather macabre, Edgar found it funny so she left it.

Where the hell was he?

I tell you there was ten of them.

It was coming up to twenty minutes since Dan had gone inside.

Is he there?

There was a muted, white flash in the sky to the East, above the base. She squeezed Edgar a little harder as she anticipated a jet.

As large as life!

No airplane came, no sonic boom, no *whump-whump* of a Chinook struggling through the sky like a cockchafer and when another, flashing brighter and nearer, came, she figured the overdue storm she'd been expecting was getting ready to vent.

Help!

The soft and comforting background sound of the radio, changed to a harsh buzz; the "Help" becoming a

squealing roll of feedback. The radio cut out after a collection of disconnected cracks, buzzes, yips and hums.

‘I think they found daddy,’ Edgar said, looking up at her.

‘Edgar...’ What could she say? If she was being honest with herself, she was more scared for herself than Edgar; he seemed quite content peering out of the side window towards the house.

She leaned forwards to get a look at the house through the front passenger window but couldn’t see anything other than the inside of the lounge. It was the only light Dan’d turned on but she couldn’t see him in there. When she sat back, she noticed his new mobile lying in the footwell and she stretched forward to get it.

She dialled her sister and when she picked up after the second ring she didn’t wait for Annabelle to greet her.

‘Bel, it’s Terri. I need you to come over.’

‘Terri? It’s ...’ there was a pause and the soft brushing sound of sheets on the other end, ‘Terri, it’s half twelve. What’s going on?’

‘It’s hard to talk,’ she mumbled, ‘Edgar’s with me.’

‘Mummy thinks there’s dead people in the house!’ Edgar shouted towards the phone. Terri frowned at him and pulled him close to her chest.

‘I had this feeling about you, Terri. All night. I was even going to get my cards out.’

‘Bring them, Bel. How soon can you be here?’

‘I don’t know. An hour? You wanna come here, instead?’

‘I can’t, I’m waiting for Dan.’

‘He’s not home?’

‘Yes. He is, he’s in the house, but...just get here as soon as you can.’

‘I’m getting ready now.’

‘Thanks, Bel. Don’t forget your tarot.’ Terri said.

‘Okay, I’ll—’

The howl Terri had encountered on the home phone earlier screamed out of Dan’s mobile and as she dropped it, she brushed the screen, switching on the handsfree function.

Once again the strange guttural chokes and half-formed words came out. Once again she heard the strange nursery rhyme. This time there was a pulsing quality to the sounds and she felt her teeth throb deep from within her gums.

Movement in the lounge caught her attention and she saw the massive dining table stand on end, perpendicular to the floor.

Edgar screamed, ‘Daddy!’

Dan was shivering when he woke. He was sitting cross-legged, his head just above the ears of mature wheat which had recently browned over, but were still supple enough to spring back to a near-upright position when he stood.

His arse was soaking wet and his clothes were covered in ultra-fine webs of dew, clinging to the filaments of his clothing. He felt wetness on the side of his face, from his temple to his jaw and gingerly put his hand up to feel it, wondering if the thumping headache he had was a result of some injury. When he brought his hand back it was covered in a clayish mud and he realised he had been lying on his side on the ground when he saw the same mud was streaked all down the side of his body.

He felt the familiar stupor of his university days; waking after too little sleep and too much alcohol, it took a shower and several coffees before he would recall the previous

night's events at the Student Union. God knows how he got through the more practical lectures in that state, barely aware of anything other than the relentless pain of a fractal headache and rolling belly. But this time he had no dragon breath, no sore throat from too much weed. In fact, the headache wasn't really that bad, and he suspected it was more to do with being out in the cold and waking in the glaring dawn than anything else. No, the similarity began and ended with the sense of total bewilderment.

Where the fuck was he? How did he get here? He patted his sodden jeans looking for his phone. Not there, so he looked at his watch. It had stopped at 00:17:22 AM but the screen showed no sign of damage. He took it off and flipped it, tapping the back. When he turned it over, the seconds started ticking by again; 24, 25, 26...

The sun was rising quickly into a cloudless, cerulean blue expanse and a nebula of steam was rising from the wheat all around him. On the horizon ahead, about ten miles away, he saw the globe and tower of the airbase.

He rubbed his face and began walking.

9

The warble of Dan's phone woke Terri.

Inside the car was bright with early morning light and Edgar was already awake sitting up next to her. He'd found some paper and was busy folding and re-folding, humming softly to himself.

The phone was on the floor and when she grabbed it, it rang off.

'Shit!' she said, then, 'You didn't hear that, Edgar.'

'You said "shit". I heard you.'

'Hmmm,' she croaked, struggling to wake, like a diver kicking for the surface of a dark lake.

She looked at the screen.

23 Missed Calls

5 Voicemails

Christ, he must have been busy at work! she thought and was about to access the voicemails when the phone rang again.

Annabelle Mobile

‘Bel?’

‘Terri, where the hell are you? What the hell is going on? Where is everyone?’

‘Bel, I’m in the car with Edgar. We fell asleep. Where are you?’

‘Where am I? Terri, I’m at yours! You called me begging me to come over last night, *remember?* I’ve been worried sick. I’ve called the police, you know.’

Terri sat up, ‘I called you?’

‘YES!’

Terri was silent for a moment. She looked at Edgar, strangely unaffected by this drama. Why were they in the back of the car?

‘Bel...’

‘Where are you, Terri?’

There were shadows outside and Terri rubbed the condensation off the window. At first she thought a slab of raw liver had been thrown at the car until she recognised it as a tongue licking the window and heard a booming, *mo00000*.

She opened the car door, and two inquisitive cows moved back. Regarding her with a mixture of interest and tranquility.

The car stood in the middle of a grassy field.

‘I don’t know, Bel,’ she said, looking at the tyre tracks leading into the field.

10

Dan walked along the mulchy verge of Old Malthouse Lane hoping the main road he was approaching was the A338. He didn't know what time it was but supposed it was approaching ten in the morning. The late summer sun dried his clothes quickly, but there was now a slick patch of sweat between his shoulder blades and his polo shirt was becoming wet again.

His stupor had lifted but he was still baffled as to how he had ended up ten miles from the base. He remembered travelling home from his shift last night, but...a cold sensation crawled into his belly; what if he'd been out there longer than just the night? His watch was unreliable having stopped in the damp so he didn't know the correct date even though it had started working again.

Okay, focus on the things you can change. Get to the base, get cleaned up, call Terri...call Terri...

Call Terri and what? She'd be a total mess wouldn't she. Christ, this was worse than it seemed at first; he could deal with the fugue but what about its fallout? Terri would

think something dreadful had happened and Ed would be out of sorts.

Jesus.

He stopped and leant against a rusted orange phone box marked SOS.

Har-har, very funny.

If he could just find a shop, he could get a bottle of water and a newspaper. It felt like a corpse had made its home in his mouth and every now and then he found little bits of soft wood or stems or something in his teeth. He spat and let his head flop onto his chest hoping he didn't look like a drunk to the passing cars.

What the hell had he done?

'Dan?'

He looked up and saw an ancient tan Wolseley, looking more boat than car, had pulled up, berthing at the side of the verge. Alfie leaned across the front seat, an unsure smile on his face, his maroon flat cap and yellow tartan blazer making him look like a gamekeeper.

'Alfie...'

'You okay?'

'No, I'm not,' he said and stumbled off the verge, half-falling, half-walking to the car. He opened the door and slumped in, breathing laboured.

'You look like you lost a bet. Or a fight.'

'I need to get to the base.'

'No, son, you need to get home,' Alfie said. A tambourine rhythm came from the dash as he flicked the indicator stalk.

Dan was asleep before they'd joined the A338.

11

Terri stood on the runners of the car, looking over the roof across the battenberg fields sloping down to the East. She scanned the horizon and could just make out the airbase tower miles away. Between her at the base she saw the familiar hump of the hill copse; thank God for small mercies.

A couple of fields over, on an adjacent road, a modern tractor was approaching and she could see the driver was looking in her direction.

‘Put your seatbelt on, Edgar,’ she said and opened the driver’s door and jumped in. She adjusted the interior mirror and reversed as fast as she dared, careful to keep the car within the tracks she’d already made into the field. Luckily the cows had moved off in front of the car when she’d fired the ignition. At least she’d ended up in a grazing field instead of a crop; she doubted the tractor driver would sympathise if she’d driven a huge swath of damage across a wheat or barley field. But as she neared

the edge of the field, she could no longer make out any tyre tracks and so she just headed diagonally for the entrance.

By the time she got to the corner, the tractor had turned onto the road flanking the cow field.

Shit, the gate's shut.

She slammed on the brakes and the car slid to a halt.

'Stay here, hon, I'm just going to open the gate,' she told Edgar, but when she got to the gate she saw a heavy link chain and padlock looped through the tubular bars and gatepost hasp.

The tractor was now about a couple of hundred yards away and bearing down on her position, rattling and belching along the rural lane.

They were trapped and she didn't have time to think about how she'd ended up in a padlocked field - *add it to the list*. She had to come up with an excuse for being here. Yeah, well, fat chance. She couldn't come up with one if she couldn't justify getting into the field in the first place.

Shitshitshitshitshit.

The tractor slowed to a stop and the engine cut off cleanly. A bright-faced boy with curly auburn hair jumped down from the cabin and a border collie dog bounced out, running to Terri and grinning insanely.

'Hello miss, are you stuck?' he said.

'Er...I' she stuttered, bending down to stroke/push the dog away which was jumping up and down at her thighs.

'Tom! Leave the woman alone, now!' he shouted.

'TOM!' Edgar shouted from inside the car, and the dog was off, hugging the ground as it sped around the car to the open driver's door.

Terri looked back and forth from the car to the boy -

although she could tell now he was in his late teens or early twenties - worried, until she heard Edgar screaming and giggling as the collie playfully mauled him.

‘I don’t know how you got in there, miss,’ the young man said, fishing on a long chain dripping with keys.

‘No, well....that’s a long story,’ she said hoping to avoid the implied question with vagueness.

‘Move your car forward - this gate swings inwards,’ he said. ‘Tom, get out ‘ere!’

A black and white flash passed Terri and the dog disappeared behind the tractor, barking.

Terri hurried to the car and pulled forward so the gate could be opened. She saw the man-boy beckoning her and she reversed through the entrance, turning right onto the lane.

He approached the window and she lowered it, ‘Thank you...’

‘Peeler,’ he said, ‘Peeler John.’

‘Thank you, Peeler, I—’

‘You don’t have to thank me. You won’t be the first person I’ve found in a field out here,’ he said, and laughed, ‘Gawp, no!’

‘What do you mean?’ she said and turned off the ignition.

‘Just as I say, miss.’

Should she tell him her name? He was unfazed by her predicament but it seemed silly to risk giving her identity. He must have seen the dilemma in her face as he said, ‘It’s okay. You be on your way now, miss.’ But he looked a little awkward.

‘TOM!’ Edgar shouted. He rolled down the window and the dog came bounding up, jumping into the car.

‘Tom, get out of the lady’s car, you useless bag of fur.’

The dog was licking Edgar’s face with frenetic enthusiasm and he was squealing with delight.

‘When you say you’ve found people in a field...?’

He shifted from foot to foot and thrust his hands deep in his pockets, ‘There’s a lot of things go on around here. Specially that old house - Office 109.’

‘Like what?’ she asked a little too eagerly at the mention of her new home.

‘Like it holds a lot of interest for folk - people come from Salisbury, Amesbury, all over to see that place.’

‘Really?’

‘Previous owners - the Levensons - people before the current owners, the Coles, they got fed up with folk coming and trespassing so they did an open house one Halloween. Expected twenty or so people.’

‘Wait,’ she stopped him; he must be confused, ‘You’re talking about the converted office? From the War?’

‘Yep, that’s the one. Office 109, in Pumphrey Woods.’

‘I know the one,’ she said.

‘Most do, miss. So the Levensons figured they’d stop the rumours and charge people a quid to come look around the house. You know - once folk got a look at the place they’d leave it alone.’

‘And what happened?’

‘Let’s just say the Levensons made over four hundred pound that Halloween night. They was queuing down the lane all the way back to Woodbrough Spinney.’

She assumed that was the name of the hill copse. ‘Why’re people so interested in that place?’

‘Last three owners gone missing. Place is haunted. I found two of ‘em in the fields once. In their pyjamas. Glad

they don't sleep like me in my birthday suit!'

She yelped when Tom jumped from the back onto her lap and out of the driver's window.

'I'm sorry about my dog, miss.'

'That's okay, Peeler. Thanks for your help, I appreciate it.'

He tipped his head and touched his brow in such an old-fashioned way, Terri laughed.

'Don't you go bothering' the Coles, now, miss. They're a nice crowd and they don't need any snooper fussbuckets.'

She smiled at him and nodded, and then drove off heading towards Office 109.