

One Summer Night

She is in the uppermost room of the house, standing on the window seat like a child might. Her feet are among cushions grown heavy with dust and faded by the sun. She can see the whole of the road, all the way up to the corner.

A taxi pulls up, right there.

A man gets out and walks along the pavement. He stops at her gate and stands completely still, holding in his right hand a small suitcase. He is wearing a mackintosh, which seems strange to her, caught as she is in the warmth of the window.

Because she doesn't recognise him she feels for her panic button, strung around her neck at the insistence of her neighbours. 'In case you fall again. We might not hear you shout next time.'

She is cradling it in her hands, uncertain, when he raises his head and looks at her and she breathes in quick. A gasp, more than a breath really. She lets the button drop and places her palms flat against the glass, one either side of her face. 'It is my grandson', she says out loud to herself. 'He has come back to England.'

In the time it takes her to get to the stairs, picking her way around holes in floorboards and shuffling through discarded magazines, the bell rings only once. A ring so long she can picture his thumb grow red as it presses. But only the one, so she panics and rushes the first flight of stairs, thinking he might change his mind. When she reaches the middle landing she leans against the wall waiting for her heart to slow. She is next to what she used to call the linen cupboard when the house was full of children. As she heaves up each breath she wonders which room he will sleep in, which bed should be made up. She opens the cupboard a crack and a moth tries to escape, flapping against the door until she opens it wider and catches in her nostrils a dank smell. 'It was his hair', she says. 'I remember it being a different colour. Not grey yet, certainly not greying. That was why I didn't recognise him.'

After the second flight of stairs she stops beside the window. The woman next door is in a bed of lavender, clipping, and she thinks of her own garden, wild and

abandoned. A family of foxes have made it their home and roam through the tall grass, bold. They let her move among them and have started to come as far as the Beech that grows beside the house. There were four cubs this year and she stands every afternoon by the drawing room window, watching them play, fight, clean themselves.

She and the clipping woman have been neighbours these thirty years, yet she's never got used to her being there. Their houses are so vast and their gardens so wide it was too easy to forget the presence of strangers on the other side of the fence. It is the tallness of the trees between them that made it possible to be so unaware, she thinks now, looking down. To have had conversations outside which should have stayed inside, her husband screaming and hurling garden tools.

She remembers her grandson and flinches, stumbling down the last flight of stairs. The hall is dark and unfamiliar. She feels her way by running her hands along the wall and when the bell rings again she jumps at the sound's suddenness, half-falling against the door and struggling with the keys. Spit forms at the corners of her mouth and runs onto her chin as she flips through them, too slow, too slow, opening locks and tugging bolts grown stiff.

She is blinded then, by the light.

Closing her eyes she lurches forward into the stomach of the man who towers above her, wrapping her arms around him and kneading her fingernails, hooked and twisted, into the small of his back. He drops his suitcase to the ground. 'Mon chéri,' she says, 'mon chéri.'

That night she sleeps fitfully. She turns in her bed and remembers the moment he arrived, and how it felt to hold him. She gets up to open and close the window and she hears his voice, or something like it: a murmuring floating down from the floor above. He decided to take a bedroom at the top of the house, overlooking the garden. He is sleeping in the bed he and his sister used to call 'Le Lit de Papa' when they visited each summer with their father from France. This choice puzzled her and she'd pointed instead to the room which was always his, the bed still low on the ground with its legs sawn off

especially for him after he fell from it one summer night. Such a little boy he was then, always calling for his maman, his papa, his hippopotame, his éléphant. His sister, when she stopped coming with him. ‘Ma sœur. Ma sœur.’

He will be sleeping soundly. He worked so hard all day. He was shocked when he saw the kitchen. ‘What have you done?’ he said, covering his mouth with his hands until she explained the pool of deep red liquid seeping. ‘The little boy across the road, can’t you smell?’ she said. ‘Last year’s damsons. He picked them for me, like you used to. The freezer stopped working and they leaked. I haven’t. I can’t. I am not strong enough.’

She watched him carry piles of newspapers, soaked sticky red, out to the front of the house. He took stacks of Bakewell Tart boxes and half-finished yoghurts caked in tiny insects, saying, ‘Is this all you ever eat?’ She rolled back her lips and showed him her teeth in answer: blunt pegs blackened in her mouth. ‘Good for nothing’, she said. ‘Good for nothing now.’ And then he started. ‘Why won’t you get help, at least let someone come to the house and cut your nails, wash your hair. And you shouldn’t leave piles of money lying around, there must be hundreds of pounds here.’

She left him there and went through to the dining room, sweeping folds of cobwebs from the doorway and telling herself she hadn’t asked him to do it, down on his hands and knees like that. She stood staring at the broken window. She’d heard it happen. They came into her bedroom and saw her sleeping. Or maybe they hadn’t spotted her, small as she can be when she doesn’t want herself found. She’d hidden under the covers hardly breathing until they went. ‘Nothing mate, just a bed. Stinks. Bloody pigeons everywhere.’

Remembering this now she turns in her bed once more and decides to go and see what he’s done down there; she knows she won’t sleep again, there is so much to think about.

When she arrives and switches on the light it is as if someone has stolen her kitchen it is so clean. The damsons have left their stain though, a dark purple spreading across the linoleum like a bruise on a baby’s back. The bulb flickers and hums above her, breaking the night’s quietness, and then she notices he’s taken the photographs from the fridge door. She runs her hand over where they used to be, white rectangles against

yellow. Her skin catches on a piece of sellotape he missed and she closes her eyes. There are her grandchildren, him and his sister, the summer they had their faces painted. 'Je suis un tigre.' 'Je suis un papillon.' The paint smudged slightly around their mouths from the ice-creams they'd gorged on at the end of the afternoon. They'd smacked their lips like little monsters and stuck their tongues right into the cones, licking each other's faces to get the last of it as if they hadn't eaten for days. And there they are the year before that, waving goodbye from a basket the day they took off over the Downs in a hot air balloon. They had wanted her to come, clinging to her crying when she said she was too scared and their grandfather would take them on his own. And there is his sister, a little older this time, wearing a bikini and posing under an umbrella by the paddling pool they'd bought when they thought the children would come every summer. And then she hadn't come again after all, leaving her little brother to visit them by himself each year. How she'd fought to take off her top that day. 'Comme les dames en France, mamie.' 'The neighbours might see you through the trees', she was told when she cried and screamed and scratched back. Or her grandfather, watching from his vegetable patch.

She is angry now and finds she has to brush away tears. He must have moved the photographs to clean the door, that is all, and taken them up to his room without thinking. She decides to go and fetch them back. The stairs to the top of the house take her an age. She is distracted by things swooping past as she climbs. She arrives in the eaves and stands outside his bedroom, turning her head and pressing her ear to the door. She clasps the handle and opens it suddenly, stepping backwards into the darkness of the corridor. This way, she thinks, if he is woken by the noise he will think the door was flung open by a gust of wind, or a ghost, and he'll get up to close it and go back to sleep. And if he is sleeping too deeply to be woken, she can go in. Which, after waiting and hearing nothing, is exactly what she does.

She is surprised to discover he sleeps with the curtains open. Apart from where the bed is tucked into the shadows of the eave, his room is lit so brightly by the moon it is as though it is not yet night. The glass cabinets lining the walls appear floodlit, museum-like. She runs her hands across them, stopping here and there to look. The toys were put here when the children became careless and they are locked up still, protected from dust and prying hands. Some of them await repairs: a bear with its head wrenched from its

neck, threads hanging loose about its body. It slumps against the glass, stuffing seeping from its stomach. There is a doll entirely limbless, its naked torso propped against the bear. Patches of hair sprout from its head and it smiles, its porcelain cheeks smeared with rouge and its eyes glinting.

She turns away and is walking across the room to look out at the garden when she hears it:

A single shout.

Her name.

Clear against the silence of the night.

She opens the window. The leaves of the Beech whisper to one another, making a noise very much like the sea. A pair of foxes drifts through the grass, pausing to raise their noses before rooting around for something. They skitter and go and she looks further up the lawn and sees a man standing there, looking right at her. Her heart stops, restarts twice as fast.

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She is woken by the children. They have clambered into their grandparents' bed and are rubbing their faces into her. Sharp elbows jut her ribs and feet pummel her thighs. Her eyes are closed, but she senses she is alone with them. Her husband will have escaped, dishevelled, to the kitchen. The experience of waking the first morning to find them crawling under the sheets playing with a torch was too much for him and he has learned to get up before them. Soon, he'll bring a tray of coffee and juice and she'll open her eyes but for now she'll enjoy, half-asleep and half-awake, the delicious sensation of the warmth of their bodies. And their smell. There is nothing quite like the smell of little children fresh from sleep, almost like butter, she sometimes thinks, her face buried in necks or under arms as they tumble. Or like milk warming. One morning as the three of

them lay waiting for grandpa, Sophie put her arms around her grandma's neck and said 'Mamie, je n'ai jamais été aussi heureuse de toute ma vie' and Pierre jumped up and down shouting 'Je suis une sauterelle, Je suis une sauterelle', and she knew what it was to be content.

This morning though they smell entirely different. They are licking her face but their tongues feel rough and strange and a sharp scent meets her, almost rank. When she opens her eyes she wants to scream she is so surprised by the foxes' noses, dark and wet, pushing against her mouth and cheeks. And the heat of their breath, panting. There are two of them, and they stop licking when they see she is awake. They circle, lowering their heads and nudging. One of them lifts a paw and places it on her chest. She raises her head from the ground and sees it has left a smudge, dark against her nightdress. Then she realises she is wet, and cold, and lying amongst grass which, covered in the dew of early morning, hangs heavy on her. She lowers her head again. She can see the uppermost windows at the back of the house and the Beech, and she understands: she has fallen, that is all. She sighs and reaches for her panic button. She stops immediately, ashamed to call for help without attempting to get up. But when she does try, a pain shoots from the middle of her back. It burns right into her and when she tries again, it spreads a little further. She lies still for a while and then she reaches up, feeling for the button.

It is not there. It is missing from around her neck. She sighs. Then once more, and the sigh becomes a moan, like a kind of singing. A drop of dew falls from a piece of grass above her face and lands square in the middle of her forehead, running down her nose and settling on her top lip. The foxes have curled up beside her and lick themselves now, no longer interested. After the initial surge, she doesn't feel any kind of panic. There is nothing she can do. She turns her head a little and sees the tops of the trees running between her garden and the next. Perhaps later on, if she hears someone there, she'll call out. She gazes at the sky. There are no clouds this morning. She wonders what she looks like from up there, a tiny woman in her nightdress lying in the middle of a lawn. Then she wonders what she would have seen from the balloon if she'd gone with them that day, up above the Downs, and what they would have said to her, holding her hands in the basket.