

An Early Biologist

by Neil Bastian

He'd long been aware of a vague disquiet at the back of his mind – certainly since adolescence – but he'd been too busy to pay it any real attention before (searching for food, protecting his children from predators, moving from place to place as the seasons dictated, fornicating with vigorous abandon whenever the instinct took him – all this used up a lot of time and a lot of energy).

But life these days was getting a little less hectic. He was forty now. All but one of his children had left home, the recent bumper crop of nearby autumn fruit had made foraging unnecessary – for a while, at least – and an epidemic had wiped out the local bear population, allowing him to lower his guard.

For the first time in his life, then, he had time to think.

And this morning, as he lay blinking at his cave ceiling, his back-of-the-mind inklings suddenly started to elbow their way to the forefront. They were forming themselves into a specific idea – an idea that he sensed would prove shattering if he allowed it to arrive.

With a sharp tightening from scalp to sphincter, he leapt from the ground, shaking his head furiously, scattering the inklings apart just in time to stop them completing their terrible picture.

His mate, stirred by his abrupt movement, croaked a morning greeting, broke wind, and continued to doze.

He stared down at her for a moment, pop-eyed, his pulse hammering in his temples. He waited a second longer, then began to breathe more easily. The inklings were gone. They'd dispersed back into the shadows. He hugged himself against the cold and tip-toed outside to empty his bladder.

As the resulting steam rose from the grass around him, he surveyed the dip and rise of the valley below – the trees, the rocks, the winding river.

The flying things were everywhere, as usual.

Tiny buzzing ones zipped past, like sparks in the early morning sunlight; big ones flapped, soared and swooped, landing sometimes on a tree, sometimes on the ground, strutting for a while, pecking at fallen berries, then flying off again.

It struck him for the first time that these buzzing and flapping things were absolutely everywhere. What on earth were they all up to? As another one took off, he decided to follow it with his gaze, but his eyes led him to the big, blazing circle in the sky – the thing that never allowed you to look at it for more than a millisecond. He winced. The way that it hung there all day, not permitting itself to be scrutinized: it was like a truth that knows it's too damaging to be contemplated for more than a moment – one that doesn't want to be revealed because –

The inklings again!

He waggled his penis free of drips and shook his head, more frantically this time, as though ridding his hair of an entangled wasp.

He was interrupted by a noise from behind him.

His mate was standing there, yawning. She delivered a series of grunts and gestures that added up to an announcement that they were out of apples, and would he mind nipping down into the valley to get some?

He looked at her, and wondered what the reason was for these wearying daily tasks. We get this fuel stuff to pop into our mouths so that we can keep on going long enough to wake up the next day, in order to get *more* of this fuel, so that we can wake up the day after and do the very same, in order to be able to do the same the day after that...

The bad thoughts were flocking again, grouping themselves hastily as though trying to form their final picture before he could launch another counter attack.

His pulse quickening once more, he searched the sky for a distraction, and was again blinded by the big, blazing circle.

But if the big, blazing circle didn't want to be looked at, the truth that had been pursuing him for weeks certainly seemed intent on making itself known, now, and –

A whimper of hunger from behind him.

His daughter had appeared at the cave mouth, peeping between his mate's hairy legs. She held her little belly, a mournful expression on her face.

This was distraction enough. His heart filled with love for her, dispersing the inklings for a third time.

He turned and trudged doggedly to the place where the food trees grew.

When he got there, he found six other him-things of his kind, gathering fallen fruit. He eyed them warily; they eyed him too. With his joints aching so much these days, he had even less of an appetite for fighting than he'd had in his younger years, so he was relieved when there turned out to be no prospect of argy-bargy: the few grunts that did emerge were along the lines of 'Good morning' or 'Nice weather we're having', rather than 'hands off my breakfast', so he collected, unchallenged, as many apples as he could carry, and returned to his cave.

When he arrived, he released the fruit from his arms, letting them roll onto the floor. His mate and his child fell on them with glee.

He'd intended to pop out immediately to get some more, to create a stockpile to last them a few days.

But the sight of his mate and child eating, staring dull-eyed as they chewed, stopped him in his tracks.

This, at last, was when it happened: the inklings finally coalesced – the idea that had been dormant in him, he now realised, for his entire life, unfurled its petals, revealing its ghastly heart.

Reality.

He was part of reality.

He had not chosen to be part of it – his consent had not been sought.

But he was part of it, nonetheless.

And this ‘reality’ – it had no cause, no reason to be, and no reason not to be. In fact, it had no meaning whatsoever – it was beyond meaning.

But, clearly, it existed.

Because here he stood, witnessing it.

He yelped, and jumped backwards, then turned his face to the cave wall, not wanting his fear to be seen.

From behind him, his mate asked him what the matter was, but he waved a hand over his shoulder at her, dismissing his yelp as a trifle.

It had been anything but. Terror was currently clawing at his very core – a terror he hadn’t believed possible.

He gawped at the backs of his hands: huge, hairy spiders. Why hadn’t he noticed them before? He wiggled his fingers, but this brought his hands to sudden and horrid life, and he yelped again, hiding them under his armpits and pressing on them tightly so that they’d be unable to twitch again and repulse him into sheer madness.

He stared at the ceiling, holding his breath.

A gurgling noise corkscrewed upward inside him, as if to remind him that, sorry, there was no getting away from this: he existed.

He took a cautious peek over his shoulder at his mate and child.

There they were still, munching merrily away, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, to have a ‘reality’ to be part of.

Why weren’t they amazed by it, or horrified, as he was?

He spent a terrible day. He lay for hours, mute, staring at the cave wall, as wave after wave of awe swept over him.

His mate cooed and stroked him, clearly aware that something was very wrong. But how could he explain to her what he was feeling, in mere grunts, snuffles and gestures?

He lay awake all night, stricken with fear, staring at the moonlit back of his mate’s head.

Somewhere in the valley below, wolves howled.

Days passed.

Images of animals, of stars, of flowers and fruit crowded his mind every time he closed his eyes.

He became fixated on the fact that he couldn't remember the very start of his life.

He had faded in from nothingness – emerged into reality from a void – a void that had also been reality.

Though he couldn't remember his own beginning, his earliest recollection was the birth of his brother, born by firelight, shadows flickering on the walls of the cave. He recalled the echo of screams, lots of dark blood and water, a slick skull appearing between his mother's legs...

Really, an entire body emerging from within another body? It was too horrific to be true. But it *was* true.

How strange it was to exist – to be made of... stuff.

Spongy, hairy, greasy stuff.

Stuff that moves around.

Creeps around.

It was monstrous.

The nights were long.

On the fourth dawn after his insight, things started to get a little better.

He stirred from another troubled sleep to recognise that no matter how much he worried about it, this 'reality' stuff could always be relied upon to be there when he opened his eyes, and it seemed entirely passive.

Well, if it didn't care about him, perhaps he shouldn't care about it.

Feeling brighter, he finally found courage to pull out a hand from his armpit, and look at it, and to wiggle his fingers again.

They were controlled, weren't they, by something in his *head*?

Yes. He felt it. It wasn't something in his feet, his stomach, or his groin. It was something in his head.

And this thing inside his head: not only did it control his hands, his arms, his legs – not only did it control him – but, he now decided, it actually *was* him – The *Real* Him.

No wonder it had always felt so uncomfortable in there: The Real Him – the core of his being – was trapped in an inhumanely small space.

And not only would conditions be cramped in there, but it would be pitch dark, too (unless, he figured, light was somehow filtering in through his eyes, perhaps – or his ears..?) But this was quibbling: even if there was a vestige of light to relieve the gloom, it was still a harsh confinement.

Consumed by a sense of injustice at the imprisonment of The Real Him, he jumped up, grabbed a piece of white crumbly stone, and began to scrawl excitedly on the wall.

He managed a passable outline of the front-on view of a head, with ears at either side.

In the centre of this head shape, he drew a question mark. He had no idea it was a question mark: only thousands of years later would question marks be anointed with a meaning. At this point, it was just a random squiggle to denote the mysterious ‘something’ inside his head.

His mate was awake by now, sitting up and rubbing her eyes; she bade him a husky good morning, remarked that he seemed a little more lively today, and asked him what he was doing.

He pointed to the scribbled symbol – the unwitting question mark – and attempted to explain in his version of a language: “That – that thing in my head – that thing in *your* head – it’s trapped! It wants to be free!”

His mate frowned.

He picked up the chalk again, returned to his diagram, and drew into the head a triangular crack. From this crack, with three flicks of the wrist, he sketched a trio of flight lines to illustrate something escaping.

He paused, tapping his chin with the chalk.

What would this ‘something’ – The Real Him – look like?

A bird.

He found himself drawing a bird.

He stared at it.

He marveled.

Of course! *That's* what they were – the flying things! They were things set free from people's heads, which had previously been trapped.

No wonder they were always buzzing around and singing: it was the thrill of freedom – their jubilation at being released!

He dropped the chalk and ran to the cave entrance.

There they all were, zipping and swooping joyously around in the light of a new day. One of them even zoomed right up to his face as if to say “So, you've finally worked it out, have you?”, before buzzing away invitingly: “Come and join us, the flying's fine!”

The more he thought about it, the more his theory made sense. The smaller ones – the tiny, buzzy ones with see-through wings – they must have come out of the heads of tiny animals, like the ones he saw scurrying into holes at the back of the cave. The slightly bigger ones – the ones that flutter around flowers – must have come out of the heads of creatures like the branch-scramperers he saw collecting nuts. Then, as the animal size increased, so would the size of the creature trapped inside its head, right up to the flapping, tweeting things he presumed would be imprisoned in him-things skulls.

He turned back into the cave and lurched around like a maniac, appearing to search for something.

When his mate asked him what he was doing, he replied that he was looking for the nutcracker.

His mate produced from somewhere behind her a grapefruit-sized rock, and handed it to him.

He weighed it in his palm, shook his head in dissatisfaction, and let it drop. He then rushed outside, accompanied by another baffled query from his mate.

He returned quickly with a large boulder that was so heavy he had to carry it in both hands, as though cradling an enormous beer belly.

He staggered up to his mate – and his daughter, who was by now also awake – then dropped the boulder with a thud onto the ground in front of them. His child giggled and clapped.

His mate stared at the boulder, then back at him: what did he expect her to do with it?

In answer, he lay himself on the ground, on his side, facing her. He then pointed excitedly at the boulder, and, with a repeated jab of his finger, at his skull.

Her face fell in horror, and she shooed away the idea, jabbering in high-pitched protest.

But his eyes shone with the zeal of the fanatic: he explained that for her to bash his skull in would be an act of kindness – she'd be setting free his flapping thing.

There was much animated babbling that ended up lasting an hour, him going over and over his theory, pointing at the drawings, showing her the buzzing and flapping things that zipped and swooped outside, until eventually she understood his reasoning, and submitted.

Relieved, he nestled himself back down on the cave floor, readying himself for the bliss of release. Within seconds he would be flying high with all the others, soaring into the firmament, singing their songs of joy.

With a groan, his mate picked up the boulder with both hands, shaking her head, declaring that she was not a hundred per cent sure about the idea, now that it was coming to the crunch.

But he insisted, and she planted a leg on either side of him, shuffling along the length of his body until she bestrode his head, the boulder held directly above it.

He lay there on his side and stared at his child, who was gazing back at him from across their stockpile of apples, her morning hair sticking up jaggedly, her eyes wide.

As he beheld her wondering face, his own expression changed from one of sacramental readiness to sudden alarm: this boulder was *big*. Once dropped, it would crush his skull, yes: but surely it would crush his flappy thing along with it. There was no way the creature would have time to escape – to fly free. It would be squashed to a pulp!

By now, his mate's elbows had locked, her arms taut and trembling with effort of keeping the heavy stone suspended.

- He wondered whether he was wrong about this whole thing.
- His mate asked him if he was ready.

(Maybe he should test his theory on something first: a branch scamperer, maybe?)

– His mate informed him that she couldn't hold the rock any longer.

(Or on a floppy-eared hoppy thing, perhaps?)

– His mate grunted: her sweating fingers were losing their grip.

(Actually, there was no 'maybe' about it: he should definitely test this idea on something else first.)

“NAAH!” he cried; “WAAH!” replied his mate, and, just as he rolled to his left, she, with a mighty roar, hauled the massive boulder to his right.

It landed on top of the pile of apples, which went “splat”. Their daughter shrieked with laughter, and pointed at the cidery slurry.

As he struggled to his feet, his mate, in jabbering protest, made it quite clear that she disapproved of his infuriating indecision: did he *want* her to smash his head in, or not?

After half an hour of apologies and mollifying gestures, he persuaded her to come and help him test his theory on a smaller creature: they ate hopping, floppy-eared animals all the time, didn't they? But they'd never checked inside the creatures' *heads*. If they were to catch one now, and smash the skull, and a little flapping thing were to fly out, they'd have proof.

He was already at the mouth of the cave, eager to get going, offering her his hand. Tutting and shaking her head in affection at his eccentricity, his mate accompanied him out into the morning air, taking their child onto her shoulders.

Two hours later, they were all back in the cave.

He tossed two dead, broken-skulled animals onto the flat stone they used for meat storage, and slumped down next to them.

He was devastated. Nothing had flown out from the head of the floppy-eared thing, or from the head of the antler-beast he'd insisted they chase as a backup. Nothing had flown from either of them – not a dicky bird.

All that had been inside their skulls was a grey, uninspiring, creviced blob.

Was that really all there was? Was that what was inside his head, too? How could that grey stuff generate such pain and passion and puzzlement? How could it create in him such a powerful urge to be free – to soar? And even if he continued his experiments, and ended up proving that the grey stuff *did* in fact generate all his pain, passion and puzzlement – well, what was the purpose of that?

His mate massaged his shoulders, sensing his despair.

She cooed in his ear, trying to snap him out of it: would he mind skinning the breakfast while she prepared a fire?

He didn't stir, though, from the meat slab.

He decided then and there that he would never kill another animal, because clearly, their life – their bodies – are all they have.

He shivered.

The first cold of winter curled around him into the cave.

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If you enjoyed the story, you might be interested in my novel,
[Mr Mortimer](#).

Details and opening chapters follow...

Mr Mortimer

The Amazon Top 5 Bestseller*

One mild October night, Samantha and Frank, a fortysomething, happily-married couple, open their door to their retired neighbour, Daniel Mortimer.

Reporting the death of his wife, their childless caller has no-one else to turn to in his loss.

Sam, good-natured and practical, offers to help, and at first her interest is one of neighbourly concern. But her relationship with Daniel soon deepens, and Sam is forced to make a decision that could destroy her marriage forever.

Mr Mortimer is by turns tough and tender in its examination of relationships, and addresses the nature of love, age and sexuality in a way that will captivate anyone interested in life's choices and matters of the heart.

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*#4, Amazon Kindle USA Chart (Genre Fiction - Family Life) 13 April 2013

Mr Mortimer - opening chapters by Neil Bastian

1

There had been no sirens – no flashing lights.

The gentle whoosh of the car's arrival had not been enough to stir Sam from her bed. Neither had the slam of its doors and the crunch of grit under foot.

But when those same feet had ascended next-door's steps, accompanied by unfamiliar voices and the crackle of a walkie-talkie, she'd been up and at the window in an instant.

In the road below her a sleek police car was parked, bathed orange in the street lamp.

“Why would the police be calling on the Mortimers at this time of night?”

Sam’s query, addressed to her husband Frank, was rhetorical: twenty-five years of sharing his bed had taught her that after six Stellas, even an all-out terrorist attack on Viaduct View wouldn’t break the rhythm of his snoring. It kept its pattern now.

Sam stared at him for a moment, his big belly rising and falling in the dark. Forty-seven this Sunday. The birthday present she’d bought him – a PlayStation game (Mexican bandits versus zombies, or something) – wasn’t adequate, she felt, even though Frank had insisted it was all he wanted. She would have to get him an additional gift – two additional gifts, even.

She turned back to the window. She’d been too late to get a proper glimpse of the visitors: all she’d caught was a flap of black trouser disappearing into the recess of the porch as the callers were swallowed up by the adjoining house. But Sam could hear a discussion going on in there now. Perhaps if she listened hard enough she could scrape together some facts about the crisis.

The speakers, however, were clearly mindful of the late hour – they were keeping their voices low. Sam lingered a while longer, and as she listened hard, she scanned the town spread out in the valley below her, its lights twinkling like stars reflected in some vast, dark reservoir.

After another twenty seconds, defeated by the muffled nature of the voices, she flicked the curtain back across the window and returned to bed.

Half an hour later she was shaking her husband awake: “Frank... Frank, there’s someone at the door.”

“Babe... whu-?”

“The door. Something’s wrong, love.”

“Well go an’ answer it, then, I’m tryin’ to have a kip here...”

“*Fra-ank...*”

“Joshin’, joshin’...”

Ten seconds after this, they emerged onto the landing, Sam snapping on the light, both of them wincing and groaning in its glare. They descended the stairs, looping arms into dressing-gown sleeves and getting tangled up in one another like clowns in some lame circus routine. As they reached the bottom, Sam saw immediately through the pebbled glass of the front door that their night-time caller was, as she had predicted, one of the Mortimers.

It was the husband: his six-foot, slightly stooped figure and long face were unmistakable even when distorted by the glazing.

Frank knotted the gown cord tight around his paunch and opened the door.

There was their neighbour, moonlit from behind, porch-lit from above, his silver hair dancing in the warm night breeze. Dressed in an open-necked white shirt, ironed trousers and polished shoes, he looked as though he'd either not been to bed yet, or had changed into smart clothes especially to call on them. But then, Daniel always took care over his appearance – he was always turned out immaculately.

He greeted them both by name, before prefacing whatever he had to say with apologies for waking them.

“Not at all, Daniel,” said Sam. “Is everything all right?”

She held her breath. The man who stood before her had never once knocked at their door, ever, in the five years since they'd moved here to Viaduct View; Daniel and his wife had never popped round to borrow so much as a drawing pin from Frank and Sam, and what little communication they had exchanged – very small talk about the weather and the local news – had been done purely by accident during coincidental rubbish-bag trips to the ends of their respective driveways.

Clearly, though, events had come to such a pass that half a decade of polite reserve now needed to be swept aside.

“It's Millie,” said Daniel.

He looked at his shoes. Sam looked pityingly at his downcast face; he then raised it and finished his announcement.

As soon as he'd done so, Sam shot a hand to her mouth: “Oh, Daniel, I'm *sorry*. Oh, poor Millie! Oh, there's a terrible, terrible *shock* for you!”

She ushered him inside. As Daniel passed him, Frank, still not fully awakened even by the dreadful news, risked a large, noiseless yawn. Sam caught this in the hallway mirror and darted him a castigating glare as she bustled Daniel through to the dining room.

2

The three of them sat in the circle of the dining-table's overhead lamplight. As Daniel talked, he stared at the mug of camomile tea Sam had placed in front of him.

"I popped down to town yesterday morning, and as I left, Millie said she was going to visit an old school friend. When it came teatime I rang her to see when she'd be back, but her phone jumped up from the coffee table. And when she wasn't back for the six o'clock news, I started to wonder if something bad had happened..."

He paused to look at the veins that cabled the backs of his hands.

"Eventually, I rang the police. And this afternoon they got a call from a man walking his dog. Woman washed up. Southerndown..."

A knot twisted in Sam's stomach. Southerndown was where people went to end it all. The cliffs.

"She didn't jump," said Daniel, seeming to sense her dread. "No injuries of that sort. She must've just... walked into the sea..."

"You should've called round," said Sam. "To think, Frank – he's been sitting next door on his own all day yesterday – and tonight!"

Daniel glanced up from under his brow, its furrows burnished yellow by the overhead bulb: "I haven't been home this evening. Had to go and identify her."

Sam pictured Daniel standing in the mortuary, a sheet drawn back to reveal the awful truth. Another knot of empathy twisted in her stomach.

"The policewoman who brought me back – when she found out we haven't got any children – no brothers and sisters – she said she'd knock your door. But I insisted... said I'd be okay. Felt it would've been an intrusion, anyway, so late at night..."

"You should've called round soon as you knew she was missing, shouldn't he, Frank?"

“Course.”

“You must’ve been going out of your mind.”

“Well... I suppose it’s over now. The worry part. I just had to... share it with someone. Policewoman was right: after they’d left I found I couldn’t just go back to bed...”

“Of course. And if there’s anything you need, Frank and I are here to help – aren’t we, Frank?”

“Any time. You need anythin’ pickin’ up, dropping off...”

Daniel thanked them both, looked at his large, criss-crossed palms, then slapped them lightly on his thighs, making a show of leaving: “Well, I’d better...”

Sam urged him to have another cup of something, and embarrassed herself by spouting trivia about the different types of teas she had stockpiled in her kitchen cupboard.

But, perhaps aware that his empty house would have to be faced, or perhaps because he felt he’d asked enough of his neighbours for one night, Daniel rose.

At the front door, Sam repeated her offer of help, and Daniel thanked her again before turning toward the night.

Sam would normally have stayed at the threshold to see him off: she always smiled and waved as any departing visitor turned for a final goodbye.

Tonight, though, as she watched Mr Mortimer’s broad-shouldered back receding down her front steps, she felt it inappropriate. She didn’t want to risk his glancing up to see her standing there, pitying him.

So she closed the door quietly and rested her head on the PVC frame for a moment, bowed by empathy for his loss.

3

The next morning, a Saturday, Frank left the house early to help his brother Brian, who was building an extension to his beloved semi across the valley (“Bloody thing’s taking longer than the fucking pyramids”, had been Frank’s parting shot).

Sam was left to herself, then, sitting in the same seat she’d occupied the previous night as Daniel had delivered his news.

Wrapped in her dressing gown, holding a mug of tea, she was gazing through the dining room window at the mountain that rose up behind their house – Viaduct View was the valley’s last row of houses before civilisation ended and wilderness took over.

Staring at that brackened mass, Sam was overcome with a strong feeling of compassion for her neighbour. She wanted him to know that, though he had no relatives, he was in people’s thoughts. Perhaps she should pop round now to see if he needed anything?

No. It was only eight o’clock: if Daniel had managed to fall asleep – though how anyone could fall asleep after such a terrible blow, Sam couldn’t imagine – but if he *had* managed to, she didn’t want to be the one to wake him up to his bleak new reality. She would give him an hour or two before she called.

The task daunted her. She needed something to focus the visit on – to take away some of its starkness.

She scanned the kitchen, visible through the archway that Frank had knocked through the dining room wall when they’d moved in five years ago.

Her eyes rested on a large mixing bowl that she kept on top of one of the cupboards.

She had her answer.

She would bake Daniel a cake.

Within ten minutes, Sam was back from Mr Sharma’s shop, laden with ingredients. Her mother’s greasy cookery book was propped up now on the kitchen worktop, open at the cakes section, blaring a garish 1960s photograph of a canary-yellow Victoria sponge, its jam filling blood-red, clashing with a gaudy orange background. “Mine’ll look much better,” thought Sam. She switched on the radio to accompany her task, but the banal chatter of a DJ flirting with a female traffic reporter sounded insolently chirpy and at odds with Sam’s mood of compassion for her neighbour – she switched it off immediately. Her empathy hit again, and she leaned forward, gripping the sides of the mixing bowl, as though reeling from physical pain: “That poor man. That poor, poor man...”

The house was soon filled with the smell of baking, and within half an hour Sam was laying the two halves of the sponge out onto cooling racks, her face a picture of concentration. She patted their moist sponginess and nodded in approval.

She wanted to deliver the cake as soon as possible so that Daniel would feel alone for no longer than was necessary, but she was unable yet to apply the jam and buttercream, the sponge halves being too hot, so she opened the kitchen window and sat the two halves on the sill.

Upstairs, she changed out of her house clothes – tracksuit trousers and the baggy ‘Frankie Says Relax’ t-shirt that her husband had bought for her years ago as a joke (“because you never do,” he’d said; she’d laughed, but the truth of the message had stung).

She showered, pondering Mr Mortimer as the suds slid down her. No siblings. No children. She hoped he had friends to help him in his loss. How old was he, late sixties? He’d run a pub years ago. You can’t get to your late sixties, and run a pub for years, and not have troops of friends.

She changed into a pair of dark jeans and a smart polo-neck sweater. She wasn’t dressing up especially for her visit: she was vain of her appearance when it came to anyone, male or female, and after last night, when Daniel had witnessed her and Frank in the full disarray of their night clothes, she wanted to compensate for any slatternly impression that may have been given.

She twisted open a lipstick in front of the bedroom mirror and parted her lips, ready to apply it. But she shook her head. “Too much,” she said, and screwed it shut with a click.

When she got back downstairs, the sponge halves had cooled, so she placed the bottom half on an old, rose-patterned dinner plate – like the cookery book, she had inherited it and its accompanying set on her mother’s death.

Sam completed the construction of the cake, spreading the buttercream thickly, adding raspberries to embellish, and spooning on the jam with great bounty. She positioned the top layer of sponge with the care of an archbishop crowning a king, and pressed down on it gently so that the jam bulged temptingly all around its circumference.

Once she had sprinkled icing sugar over the top, she could think of nothing more to improve its appearance, so she stepped back to admire it, allowing herself an approving nod but denying herself a smile of satisfaction: this was, after all, just a small offering to say that she and Frank were thinking of their neighbour – it was not an opportunity to show off her baking.

The finest-looking Victoria sponge Sam had ever made was finished. There was nothing left for her to do but to take it next door.

4

Standing with the cake held in the crook of her arm, Sam pressed Daniel's doorbell.

When he failed to appear, she pressed a second time, and as she waited, she noticed the two large ceramic pots that stood at either side of the porch – beautiful, autumn-flowering dahlias that Millie Mortimer had cultivated.

She pictured Millie crouching with a trowel, planting them, presumably tormented with dark thoughts as she'd done so.

She shook her head and shuddered. Perhaps Millie had been planning it then – working out the best way – the most painless – the least cruel to her husband – one where he won't be the one to find her.

Sam forced the thoughts away and turned to look at the railings of the park directly below her, and at the town spread out beyond in all its modest glory, the viaduct at one end. The structure had long been condemned as unsafe, and despite much protest in the local paper, Sam saw now that demolition men had begun work on tearing it down. She felt a pang of sadness at it. Vague thoughts drifted into her mind – *this is my town... this is my life... all those lives down there, but this is mine...*

She turned back to face Daniel's front door. Why hadn't he responded? His car was in the drive.

Sam's worries began to whirr. What if Daniel had been unable to bear his grief even for a single night? Perhaps he was laying inside, dead by his own hand, an empty bottle of pills by his side.

She shook the idea from her head. Sam hated her habit of worrying almost as much as she hated her tendency to fuss (or “fuss-arse”, as Frank called it) but, like the fussing, she found it difficult to resist. She made a concerted effort now, telling herself firmly that there was a perfectly rational explanation. Perhaps Daniel was simply sleeping on through the day, having failed, understandably, to fall asleep last night. And though his car was in the drive, it meant nothing: he often walked to town – she’d often glanced out of her bedroom window to see him setting out. Maybe he was at the police station – there’s always a lot of bureaucracy to sort out when someone dies, and she imagined there must be even more to deal with in the case of Millie Mortimer, with the coroner wanting to rule out foul play.

Sam turned from his house, again smarting at how lonely Daniel must be feeling, wherever he was at this moment.

No relatives. Nobody.

She returned to her kitchen and scrawled him a note:

*Dear Daniel,
Popped round with a cake if you want. Thought it might make you feel better.*

“No,” she said aloud, instantly dismissing the second sentence: what good would a cake be at cheering someone up in his circumstances? She screwed up the paper and started afresh, not scribbling this time but taking care to keep her handwriting neat:

*Dear Daniel,
Hope you are coping. Popped round with a cake for you, but you weren't in. Am out for an hour or so but please call round for it later – will be back by three.
Sam and Frank (next door)*

She pushed the note through Daniel’s letterbox, then descended his front steps, bound for town.

Her target was the local council office, which was her place of work. Before last night's disturbance, the thing that had been keeping her awake – apart from her doubts about the generosity of the birthday present she'd bought Frank – was the question of a pile of housing benefit claims, which she couldn't remember filing. She wouldn't be in work on Monday – she worked only four days a week – so any blunder on her part would therefore be left for her colleagues to deal with.

She made her way into the valley now, zigzagging automatically down the quickest route available: down the steep steps between the old bakery and the printer's, along another street parallel to Viaduct View, nicking down a gulley between two houses, which she always hurried along with a vague sensation of panic, the sound of her breathing reverberating off the walls with a disorienting aural tunneling effect.

Five minutes saw her past the rugby ground, its ramshackle stand framed by the mountains at the opposite side of the valley; she made her way down Collier's Street, which played host to the town's main parade of pubs, and she soon found herself at the river that had formed the valley in the first place, a thin, untended strip of babbling water, rocks, and litter, which the local authority had thus far never thought necessary to exploit as a thing to sit alongside with pleasure – its green, leafy riverside vegetation often provided cover for glue sniffers.

Sam arrived at the featureless 1980s edifice of the council complex, smiling a guilty "hello" to the security guard at reception, feeling like someone in a film, stealing in after hours to rifle through cabinets in search of incriminating evidence. She swiped her entry pass over a door sensor that beeped her into the open-plan office where she spent the majority of her daylight hours.

She got to her desk.

She had filed the forms correctly. Of course she had. She always did.

"Fuss-arse," she said to herself now and, departing past the security guard, she felt the need to account for the brevity of her visit, and spouted a cliché to round off her explanation: "I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on right..."

She crossed the river into town in order to sort out the issue of Frank's inadequate birthday present. Normally Sam wouldn't dream of shopping for something special in her local high street – Bridgend had more choice, or Swansea, or Cardiff – but as Frank's birthday was tomorrow, she had to make do with her home town's choice of wares. She came away from the high street with a pair of smart cufflinks and a new watch, even though Frank didn't need one.

When she arrived home at around lunchtime and opened the dining room door, it took her a moment to properly register the scene before her.

There stood Frank and his two beefy brothers, Roger and Brian, surrounding her dining table, each holding a piece of Mr Mortimer's Victoria sponge, cupping a hand under their mouths to catch any crumbs as they loomed over what remained of the offering.

“Frank – !”

Cheeks bulging, the three men stared back at her like midnight feasters caught in dormitory torchlight.

“ – Frank, that's for Daniel!”

Sam dived between the hulks and snatched away the plate, examining the damage: “Christ, Frank, you're a good host! That's three quarters you've demolished!”

“Sorry, love – it was just sat there in the middle of the table, so I presumed you'd left it out for us.”

“You said you were going straight to the pub!”

“Well, yeah, but we dropped in on the way there 'cause Brian wanted to borrow my angle grinder, and there was this cake just sitting there, and, like I said, we just presumed –”

“Frank, even if it had been for you – which it wasn't – don't you think I would've wanted to be here to watch you enjoy it?”

“But you *are* here to watch us enjoy it. And it's lovely, isn't it boys?” Frank put a final sponge morsel into his mouth and nodded with exaggerated approval as he ate, signalling his brothers to do the same.

“Yes, lovely,” nodded Brian, aping his brother’s display; Roger chimed in with a hopeful, placatory: “Stunnin’, Sam...”

Sam softened, not because she was revelling in their compliments, but because she was suddenly aware that she hadn’t actually greeted her brothers-in-law yet, a discourtesy that she redressed using a gentler tone. She then enquired about their spouses, but she ignored their answers as she continued her appraisal of the confectionery carnage, wondering if the cake was still worth taking round to Daniel.

Its wounded edges had been hewn roughly by a blunt knife, and the unthinking attack had blurred the cream and jam together into streaks. The effect of a pristine, especially-made gift was ruined. Sam didn’t even realise she was interrupting Roger’s account of his wife’s new job when she muttered aloud: “I can’t take this to him.”

Frank attempted another defence: “Well, he doesn’t need an entire cake, does he? It’s not like he’s got anyone to share it with any more.”

Sam rounded on him, staring up into his eyes with fierce wonderment:

“*What?*”

“Well, there’s no way he’ll be able to eat a whole cake himself, is there? So I was just saying that perhaps you’re making a mountain out of a –”

“He’s just lost his *wife* and you’re using that to justify your greedy bloody –”

If she continued talking Sam would use words that Brian and Roger would report back to their wives when they got home. She turned her back on Frank and stalked through the archway into the kitchen, biting back her anger by grabbing the cake-making utensils that were still drying in the draining board and plopping them noisily into a terracotta pot.

Frank was suddenly with her, squeezing her shoulders, nuzzling her neck, his voice penitent in her ear:

“Love, we’re a bunch of idiots. I’m sorry...”

This further annoyed Sam because Frank was implicating his brothers in the crime when clearly they’d just been following his orders. She was also embarrassed that Frank was performing his

tactile reconciliation display in their presence, so she brushed him off with an irritated jerk of her shoulder:

“If I’m going to make another cake for him, I’d better get to it, so why don’t you boys go and enjoy yourselves while I get baking, all right?”

Frank left with Brian and Roger in tow, both trailing apologies and further compliments about how nice the sponge had been.

As soon as they were gone, Sam sank into a chair and sighed. Frank wasn’t sorry. He just wasn’t. His apology was patronising, because really he’d thought she was fussing over nothing again.

Her gaze fell on the remaining slice of cake. She regarded it for a moment, then picked it up and bit down on it, the tension draining from her as she relished its moist, sweet deliciousness.

She leaned back in the chair, the goodness of the cake helping her anger to ebb. Her gaze drifted to the mountain outside – the autumn sun had turned the yellow bracken to gold.

As she held the slice to her mouth for a second bite, there was a knock at the door.

Sam froze.

Daniel. It had to be. None of their friends ever popped round without warning because of Frank’s ‘phone first’ edict – “if we’re not expecting anyone, then it’s British Gas or a double glazing salesman. They can fuck right off.”

But this was definitely Daniel. He’d read her note and come round for cake and company.

And here Sam was, mid-mouthful, eating the last of it. If she invited him in now it would come across as plain weird, her leaving him the note, and there being no cake.

Another knock.

Sam waited, afraid even to continue chewing in case he somehow heard it.

After a minute, no further knock came and Sam allowed her tensed shoulders to slump. She buried her face in her hands and tried to shake the notion that her good intentions had come to nothing because of Frank.

She shot up out of her chair and went to the window in her front room. Through the net curtains she could see Daniel passing in

front of her house on his way back to his own. Sam's heart sank at the look of desolation on his face.

She waited for the sound of his front door being closed, then hurried out of her house, purse in hand, heading for Mr Sharma's.

Returning from the corner shop, she arrived back in her kitchen and slid out a shop-bought Victoria sponge from its box, which bore the logo 'Smedley's'. She unsheathed it from its cellophane wrapping and placed it on another of her mother's floral plates. She regarded it with a surge of disappointment: so small compared to the one Frank and his brothers had ravaged – it looked pathetic, sitting well within the circumference of the dinner-plate roses, as though her previous cake had been zapped by a science-fiction shrink gun.

She placed it onto something smaller – a tea plate, also from her mother's set – upon which it looked less forlorn. Sam performed a quick makeover, removing the top layer of sponge, and scraping off the stingy smearing of jam and buttercream that Smedley's had deemed sufficient to keep costs low. She whipped up another helping of her own buttercream, spread it lavishly, and added a fresh layer of jam, overcompensating for the cake's meagerness by making its new filling almost the same thickness as the sponge itself.

Finally, she replaced the top layer, and regarded the cake askance.

Still not good enough.

She tutted, pinpointing the problem, reaching for her bag of icing sugar and sprinkling some over the cake's top: Smedley's hadn't bothered.

Satisfied, she scratched her nose, sugaring its tip unknowingly. She then washed her hands, collected the cake and marched down her drive.

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