

Ten Seconds

by Neil Bastian

The period under consideration occurred quite recently. To begin our look at what happened, let's pick Pete and Laura, a young couple from Finchley, North London.

They were sitting watching television in their woodchip-papered lounge, plates on laps, cutlery in hands.

"Lovely sauce," said Pete.

"Ta," said Laura.

"Jar or packet?"

"Packet," said Laura.

"Lovely," said Pete.

They ate in silence for a moment, before an urgent fanfare announced the start of the evening news.

The TV anchorman stared out at them: "Tonight on the Six O'Clock News, our top stories..."

This was as far as he got. As soon as he had uttered these words, the newsreader's eyes appeared to squint – to cross, even – and, instead of informing Pete and Laura of the day's headlines, he said simply:

"Uh... erm... Oh dear..."

His face then turned as white as his shirt.

At this point, Pete glanced at his beloved young wife.

His eyes were met with a disturbing sight.

What sat before him was, in fact, not really a 'beloved young wife' at all, but a bizarre structure that had been imbued with a consciousness it had not chosen, and which had two 'eyes' parked above a 'nose', below which was a 'mouth' that had a strand of what has become known as 'spaghetti' drooping out of it. It also had two 'ears' sprouting from either side of what is called a 'head', which was decorated all around with weird brown filaments called 'hair'.

“Good God,” thought Pete, “who needs Martians when we’ve got human beings?”

It is not, of course, unusual to be struck by the baffling nature of existence. Such flashes of insight can happen to any of us at any time.

But Pete’s epiphany was different.

Pete’s epiphany was being shared by everyone else on the planet, at the very same moment.

There was no help, then, for the terrified newsreader: his autocue came to a juddering halt as its operator reeled in horror at the concept of infinity. News announcers all over the world blanched mid-sentence, suddenly aware that they were no more significant than a bird, a bee or a banana – but viewers were oblivious of the disruption to service because the mystery of existence had jumped out at them, too, like some monstrously-endowed flasher from an alleyway. Triangles of pizza wilted before gaping mouths and beer was spluttered over a million coffee tables.

Those not watching television were similarly stricken.

An old woman in Wensleydale, watering a pot of hyacinths, let out a scream: she and everyone who existed, and everyone who had ever existed, and everyone who ever would exist, and everything inanimate too, were just coal to fuel an unstoppable, terrifying locomotive called Reality. Her dentures flopped out of her mouth and onto the flowers, which proved rigid enough to hold them aloft.

A girl of six in Kathmandu, staring at the heartbreaking meanderings of a woodlouse, saw a metaphor for us all and wailed in despair.

In Zagreb, a midwife, appalled by the apparent purposelessness of life’s never-ending production line, tried to put a stop to the cycle by pushing an emerging baby back inside its protesting mother.

At a football match in Buenos Aires, a pumped-up bladder flying through the air dropped unintercepted to the ground as all the players and the entire capacity crowd of 65,645 realised that sport was just a random matter of balls bouncing back and forth,

deflecting off bodies, sometimes arriving in the back of a net, sometimes not – as meaningless as life itself. Accompanying this depressing conclusion was the feeble cadence of a dried pea vibrating in the referee's whistle.

Three thousand and twenty-two people in various places were at that instant listening to Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*, and among them was an audience at a ballet in Sydney. But all the notes might just as well have fallen off the sheet music and onto the floor of the orchestra pit, because when the full terror of existence kicked in, the musicians stopped dead, the spectators' minds melted like cheddar under a grill, and the ballerinas scattered gracelessly backwards as though hit by an invisible bowling ball.

At the other end of the artistic spectrum, superannuated rockers Status Quo, holding a concert in Margate, were similarly beset, and the guitars of stalwart band members Francis Rossi and Rick Parfitt twanged to a discordant halt halfway through *Rockin' All Over The World* – an irony lost on the audience, who didn't know that their sudden shock was part of a global phenomenon.

Apart from those too young for rational thought, no-one was shown mercy. Even sleepers weren't exempt, their dreams invaded by unendurable truths, wrenching their eyes open, forcing them bolt upright in their beds to confront the inexplicable reality that surrounded them.

Sex wasn't transportive enough to block out the thoughts. A copulating couple in Caracas suddenly disengaged, leaping away from one another with a slurp and a pop. A masturbating medic in Mogadishu, seconds ago blaspheming in delight, ceased pumping his fist and stared aghast at the pug dog that was at that moment gazing back at him through his lounge window. A fellating Fijian gagged – always a risk where this particular hobby is concerned, but a downright certainty now, as the strangeness of existence clanged away like a hammer on an anvil.

Anyone who had recently lost a loved one pictured that loved one's face rotting in the grave. Anyone who had previously taken solace in the notion of an afterlife suddenly became terrified by the idea of the consciousness surviving in perpetuity.

Religion was no succour: its specifics now appeared piffling even to the devout. A priest placing a circular wafer onto the outstretched tongue of a worshipper suddenly burst into hysterical laughter: “How can this mass-produced disc of dough be the body of Christ?” It then occurred to him that Jesus had probably been just some highly persuasive madman, driven to delusions of grandeur by the riddle of existence – delusions that were now gaining supremacy over the priest’s own liquefying mind. A Jewish gentleman removed his yarmulke, thinking “What, am I going to be hit by a bolt of lightning?” (He wasn’t.) A Muslim turned and turned again in a toilet, buttocks bared, not sure of where to point them vis-à-vis Mecca, and not convinced that it really mattered in the grand – or, rather, terrifying – scheme of things.

This crisis of faith wasn’t confined to the pious. A renowned atheist called Richard Dawkins, about to bite down on a Dairylea-smearred cracker, suddenly turned the colour of the cream cheese he had a moment ago been looking forward to consuming, realising that although science could explain constituent parts of reality, it couldn’t account for The Fact of Reality Itself. When it struck him that this mystery could be defined as ‘God’, he dropped the cracker, Dairylea-side down, and uttered unprintable oaths.

And at a meeting of the G8, even the attending world leaders – they who govern us so selflessly – were not safe. The French representative let out a yelp akin to that of a frightened woodland creature. The Russian supremo snapped his biro. The President of the United States wet himself and the Prime Minister of Great Britain shat his pants.

The panic wasn’t confined to the surface of the Earth, however.

On the International Space Station, a suited-and-booted astronaut, fixing an exterior heat shield, thought “Hang on, why *is* everything, anyway?” When the answer he came up with – “Because it just *is*” – proved pitifully inadequate, he dropped his spanner, and away it spun into space, leading his gaze back toward his home planet, which was shining majestically below him in the reflected light of the sun. He then sneezed, coating the inside of his helmet with slime, ruining the view completely and causing him to

utter the most famous expletive in his native tongue, which was English.

On another world far above him, there were no life forms at all, but the question still lingered like last night's smoked haddock.

And, trillions of light years away from there, on a world where there *were* other life forms (three-legged, blue-skinned aliens with eyes on stalks) the query persisted, albeit in a different language.

Beyond that, at the very margins of space, it resonated like a great, echoing note, perhaps the vibration from the Big Bang, before which, we are told, was a state of nothingness impossible to ponder for too long without causing a black hole to form in the centre of the skull.

Back in North Finchley, the structure labelled 'Pete' gawped at the structure labelled 'Laura', and the structure labelled 'Laura' gawped at the one labelled 'Pete'. Both were frozen with terror at the fact that there appeared to be no reason for reality. Both felt certain, too, that this reality was about to implode, or explode, or do something not very nice at all.

Then, after precisely ten seconds of this cosmic suspense, an intercom on their lounge wall crackled to the sound of a baby's cry.

Pete blinked. Laura sucked up the stray strand of spaghetti. The television newsreader straightened his tie, the G8 leaders made apologetic departures to the toilet, and renowned atheist Richard Dawkins picked up his soiled cream cracker, devouring it in a single bite.

Another wail from the intercom, and Pete and Laura rose from their settee to attend to the needs of the tiny structure that writhed in a cot upstairs.

Its name, if you are interested, is 'Molly'.

Its purpose remains unknown.

Thank you for reading Ten Seconds.
More about my writing follows...

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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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