

Marianne was walking home with the shopping. Five bulging blue bags twisted tightly over her fingers. The shops were only a few streets away and it was the middle of March, but she had a thin sheen of sweat across her top lip. Her dark hair was scraped back into a bun that was getting looser with every step. Finally, after dodging three pushchairs, two beggars, and a six year-old on a scooter, she arrived home and collapsed on the sofa; her bags sagging pathetically beside her. It was four o'clock. Darren would be bringing the kids back at five. She kicked off her shoes and began unpacking things into the fridge, quickly throwing away the mouldy tomatoes and cabbage she had promised herself she would eat and making room for the chocolate éclairs that had been going for 50p. They were Josh's favourite, so they weren't really for her. She'd just have the one. She licked a wayward trickle of chocolate and closed the fridge door.

The living room was a mess, but with fifteen minutes to spare, the best she could do was to kick a few magazines under the sofa and wave a tea towel at the dust on the television. She hoped Darren had to rush off somewhere and would just drop Josh and Sophie at the door and go, but she knew he'd want to talk about them switching schools again. He kept saying, 'look at the results' and 'blue uniforms are just so much nicer than maroon', but she knew the real reason was that it was much closer to his apartment. He was such a twat. They were on good terms...on paper, in front of their friends, but deep down she just wanted to tell him that he was a twat and that his apartment smelled like cheese all the time because he put cheese in everything, even in puddings and cakes, I mean cheesecake aside, he put it in chocolate and carrot and lemon cakes, and she didn't even like cheese, she'd never told him this, but she didn't, not even brie or cheddar or Swiss, and his cat was ugly and the books he wrote were stupid and unrealistic and had sex scenes that not even Brad Pitt could pull off...and also occasionally involved cheese.

The doorbell rang. She tucked a few strands of falling hair behind her ears, smelled her breath, and opened the door. 'Hi guys'. Her two children gave her a couple of whirlwind hugs before pushing past, dumping their bags by the stairs and running into the living room to turn on the TV. 'Thanks for dropping them off'. Marianne debated how long a pause she needed to leave before she could say goodbye.

'No worries, is it alright if I stick around for a minute to talk about a few things?'

Fuck.

'No, that's fine, it'll be good to catch up, come on in, yeah'. She reluctantly loosened her grip on the door latch and welcomed him in. He walked straight into the kitchen. Damn, she realised she'd left the tea bags out. 'Um, do you, would you like a cup of tea?'

'Yeah, that'd be great thanks'. He sat down at the kitchen table. 'As long as you're not TEAsing...'. Twat. He'd always made that joke and she'd always pretended to laugh. 'Ha, still makes me laugh', she said as she slopped a mug of Earl Grey in front of him, 'Anyway, what was it you wanted to chat about?'

'Well', he paused and let out a small smile, 'It's quite good news really, well I think so anyway, I'm um, I'm getting married'.

Marianne was stunned. Her breath caught in her throat and launched her into the air. Her whole body floated for a moment before belly-flopping back to earth. 'Right. Well. Congratulations. I mean, you, you didn't say, you didn't even tell me that, you never, um, congratulations'.

'Thanks. I thought I'd better tell you first, you know, before the children, although I'm sure they'll be thrilled – they love Katie, they really do'.

'Oh, Katie? They've met Katie? How long has Katie..? Who is..?'

'I'm sorry for not telling you about her sooner, it's just, well, we don't really talk very much as it is and I didn't want you feeling nervous or worried or paranoid about letting Josh and Sophie meet her, so I thought this way might be best. Anyway, we've been together just under a year now and I don't know, I've never felt this way before, I feel like I can say this to you, after everything we've been through, but, I feel like a teenager again when I'm with her. I can see where I went wrong before, with you, and maybe getting married for the wrong reasons. I mean, we were wrong for each other weren't we and, oh, isn't it just so wonderful that we both get this second chance, that we gave each other this second chance for happiness?' Marianne stared blankly at him, her cup burning gently against her skin, a distant tingle. 'Mm, yeah, you're right *(Pause)* Thank you'.

Darren paused and then said, 'There's something else actually though'.

'Oh yes?'

'Yeah, it's just well, Katie kind of needs to be in London for her work and, although she's been happy commuting to see me, well, once we're married and, you know, I can work anywhere really, just give me a pen and some paper and look at me go, whoosh, so, well, we'll have to move'.

'Move?'

'Yes'

'To London?'

'Yes'

'But that's nearly two hours away'

'Yes'

'Ok, so, what does this mean for the kids, for Josh and Sophie, when will you see them? They can't keep moving to London, what about school? No, they are not going to school in London. Fuck off they are not'

'I know. I know this. Just listen for a second and don't take any of this the wrong way because I've thought about it carefully and it's just the only way this can work with Katie. I think that instead of them moving back and forth, which just isn't good for them, it isn't, I think that, I am prepared to accept that they, they will have to just come on weekends or something and holidays. I'm happy with that, I can accept that, I have accepted that'.

*(Quietly)* 'What is wrong with you?'

'Marianne, listen, I...'

'No, seriously, what is wrong with you? I've never been sure and I've always wanted to ask. What is wrong with you?' Darren stood up and moved towards Marianne. She was shaking a little. 'What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you?!' He tried to rub her shoulders, like he used to, to soothe her, to undo the mess of emotions he'd just created, but she jumped so violently and so unexpectedly that he backed right off.

Marianne sank to the floor. What had she just seen? When Darren touched her? Something had happened. A series of images had flashed through her mind. Images she didn't know, that she'd never seen before. First she was clinking glasses at some sort of conference; she was with a group of adults, a group of writers, laughing with them, and sloshing wine about. They were agreeing that they should all go back to Alan's, to listen to his records or something similarly pretentious. She heard herself, or rather she heard Darren reluctantly mutter something about having to go home, to pay the babysitter, to drive the girl back to her parents, to tuck his children in. Then she was suddenly outside a brick house and she could see a man coming towards her, a big man, a big, huge

man, with a head so high it seemed to brush against the sky. He was shouting, shouting at him, her, she felt the pain of a sharp slap against his, her cheek. Next she was home, looking at Josh. Her son, he was painting, what was he painting? She, he moved to look, but at that moment Josh accidentally knocked over the dirty paint water. A mix of muddy blues, greens, and browns seeped into the rug, leaving a layer of sediment above ground. She was surprised to feel a sudden rising urge to hit the boy, to beat him, to make him feel a pinch of pain for what he had done. And then she was back in her kitchen looking at Darren. He was staring at her with a mixture of confusion, worry, and fear. 'Thanks for the tea', he stammered, 'I'd best be off anyway. Have a think about what I said. It's a lot to take in all at once, so I'll leave you to it'. He popped his head around to say a quick goodbye to the kids and then left.

Marianne was still sitting on the kitchen floor. What the hell was this all about? She was pretty sure that had never happened before. After about fifteen minutes of replaying the memory over and over in her head she remembered that she needed to see if the children had much weekend homework left to do and to get the dinner going. She pulled herself back into reality and announced cheerily that it would be 'Chicken Kievs tonight!' Josh and Sophie shouted a brief 'hurrah!' in reply and went back to their game of Mario Kart.

That night, after baths had been had, teeth had been brushed, and stories had been read, Marianne said goodnight and kissed her daughter Sophie on the forehead. In that brief moment of contact, she was once again rushed through a flood of memories. This time it was less clear where she was or what exactly was happening as the experiences blurred together – she caught a glimpse of an old dog, struggling to breathe, a mass of spinning bodies pushing past, squeezing, a gigantic whale looming towards her, its mouth slowly gaping open, turning the pages of a book and seeing a twisted, ugly, old witch bursting from the page, then holding the papery skin of a lady who was about to disappear. Marianne broke away, more shaken than before. She hadn't been inside the mind of an eight-year-old since she was, well, eight. She went straight to bed.

The next day was a Sunday. Marianne tip-toed around her children at first, but quickly realised it was hopeless. Josh, at ten, was a little too old for cuddles, but Sophie still clung to her whenever she could. She gasped when she felt her daughter's hand slip into hers while she drank her morning coffee, but nothing happened. Perhaps it was over. Perhaps it was a Saturday kind of thing. Perhaps it never happened at all. Josh came downstairs and his mother eagerly greeted him and ran her fingers through his messy mop of recently awoken hair. Without time to let out a cry of exasperation, she was once again transported through a seemingly random set of childhood memories. Her son would no doubt sink through the floor if he knew that his mum was witnessing his first failed attempts with Evie, one of the older girls at school. Instead he didn't notice a thing and just went to pour himself a bowl of rice krispies. After that, no matter how often Marianne happened to bump into Josh or Sophie; she only saw their little faces looking back at her.

On Monday, it was back to the regular routine. She did the school run and then drove over to the office. It was a busy flurry of coffee and papers as it always was on the first day of the week. It only took her a minute to settle into the flow of yet another working day. She had a huge pile of files on her desk to work through and so she wasted little time with dull chit chat and starting rifling through them straight away. She got a mild kick out of being good at her job. She liked having a schedule – giving in to the structure of the place. It wasn't until her first break that anything amiss started to

happen. She was emptying out the kitchen tea-pot when Carol came in and tried to reach across her to pull a mug from the sink drainer. Their arms crossed and Marianne felt the familiar pull out of her own present and into someone else's past. This time she saw something a little more interesting. Among all the other hazy, unrecognisable events that raced through her mind, she suddenly saw someone she knew. It was Ryan, the guy who worked across from her. He was naked. She was walking towards him. Actually, it was more like sidling. They were in a hotel room. Carol had been married for eight years. 'I'll have a cup if you don't mind?' Carol said. Marianne managed to hold back a knowing smile and simply replied, 'Yeah sure, no problem, Carol'.

By the end of the day, Marianne had found out more about her co-workers than she could've learned from a lifetime of small talk. She'd seen the events that had shaped them, that had changed them, that had made them into who they were today. Now she knew why Cheryl stole her stationary, why Charlie had that twitch, why Cathy wore that particular shade of red lipstick and why she didn't notice that it always got on her teeth. Marianne felt powerful. Her mind buzzed with secrets. Secrets she could use to get ahead, to gain control over others, to ruin their lives should they ever get on her nerves. A well-placed note or quick whisper was all it would take. And she didn't have to stop there. Why not find out about other people, wealthy people, important people? Why shouldn't she clamber her way up; shake hands with the prime minister, the president, the Queen of England, and see what was lurking inside their heads? She hurried towards her car, her thoughts racing. Her life was about to change.

She was so intent on her future destination that she neglected to watch where she was going and tripped over something. As she separated herself from the pavement, she felt someone take her arm to help her up. Suddenly, she was desperately trying to hold the closet door shut. She was crying and she could hear shouting from the other room. It was her mother. Her mother was hurting. Her mother was screaming. The louder and lower voice charged into her bedroom. The closet burst open. She was dragged out. The screaming filled everything; surrounded her. She was suffocating from the noise of it. Then she realised it was her who was screaming. It was her who was hurting. Then the memory switched, she was being held down, she was bigger now. Her body was longer. Something was piercing it. Someone was forcing their way into her. She stared at the flaking paint on the ceiling and surrendered herself to the battle that had already been won. Then, spinning into the next image, the world became a smudgy blur as she clinked against the bottles at her feet. She turned her head to see a face, a friend, who was looking intently at a small pile of powder being split into lines, as neat as an army regiment.

Marianne couldn't bear to see any more. She jolted away from the vision. She found herself looking at a prematurely wrinkled face of concern. Marianne pulled away from the woman and stood up so that there was a bit of distance between them. 'Are you alright?' she asked. Marianne couldn't bring herself to speak. She was shivering under a cold layer of sweat. She glanced at the rug the woman had been sitting on and realised that she knew her. Or rather, that she'd seen her more than once before on her way to work. The woman was still asking if she was ok, but she felt incapable of making out the words 'I'm fine', so she just turned and ran to her car.

She didn't remember the journey home. All she knew was the moment she closed the front door behind her and burst into tears. She sat on the doormat, pulled her legs in towards her tummy, and

stayed there. Josh and Sophie were at their friends' so there was nothing for her to do but sit and think about what she'd seen, what she'd felt. She'd never been through anything like it.

That night, she couldn't sleep. She kept seeing the closet door being wrenched open, feeling the sharp grip on her arm, the terror. How could anyone fall asleep with such memories? She had to call in sick the following morning and, once she'd got the kids off to school, she lay under the sheets for what must have been hours. No matter how tightly she rolled herself up, she still felt unprotected. It was the same the next day. On the third day, as the energy and tension collected and grew in her stomach, she finally resolved to do something. She got properly dressed, put on her shoes and her coat and went into the city centre. It suddenly felt as though everywhere she turned, she'd see someone sitting out on the street, in front of a shop, under the bridge, down the alley. Why had she never really bothered herself about these people before? How had they ended up here? What had they been through? Her curiosity overwhelmed her and she started finding ways to make contact. At first she was clumsy about it. Just tried to nudge them casually, but it was a little embarrassing. Then she realised if she gave them a bit of change or bought them a sandwich, she could find a way to touch a hand or an arm and then she had their story.

Through one man she touched, she saw herself being emotionally undermined by her family, taunted by teachers at school, told that she was lazy, selfish, immature; that she wasn't needed, by her friends, by society, by anyone. Then she took a swing at her dad and was hounded out of the house. She caught herself shoplifting and taking what she needed from bins. Then, in another, she saw herself make a stupid mistake, a botched transfer with a client, the police surrounded her, searched her, found what they needed, 'It's not mine!' she said, the cliché still ringing in her ears as she sat in the prison dining hall. She is later released, only to find that the little she had is now gone and that the life she hoped to lead is a few impossible feet further away from her grasp. Through another, she saw disturbing images, twisted and shaken with paranoia and confusion. In the next, she witnessed her wife die a slow death in hospital, waiting with hope in one hand and futility in the other, and when the inevitable happened she came home to find that her debts had become as insurmountable as her grief. In another, she felt a deep and empty depression, a life never worth living, a sense of total isolation; a desperation to be seen, to be heard, to be valued.

Some hadn't been on the street for as long as their appearance suggested and Marianne realised the value of having her own shower and washing machine and money for new clothes and her own bed to sleep in. Others had become used to their nomadic way of life, with ingrained problems and habits that would take a lot of care and kindness and understanding to undo. Marianne was stunned to think how often she must have walked past so many of these people. How little she had cared. How she had believed the ideas, the stories, the explanations from the papers and the politicians telling her that there was nothing to be done, that these people had chosen this way of life, that there was no helping them, that they were lost causes, a drain on the country, that they were dangerous, addicts addicted to their own addiction and that it would be better for everyone if the public simply ignored them, as though they were petulant children whining for attention, rather than human beings in desperate need of support, of a community, a network of change.

Marianne went home. Once again, she lay under the sheets of her bed, thinking about everything she had seen, wondering what she should do next; what she could do.

She had to go to work the following morning. She was supposed to be co-ordinating interviews for prospective employees and it wasn't something she could really get out of – plus she needed something to do, something to distract her. At least now she had a fool proof technique for seeing what the candidates were really like.

She had a disheartening first couple of hours, shaking hands with people who had been largely shaped by narratives of success and the need to succeed in order to be appreciated and to understand their value in the world. She wanted to stop each interview and take the applicant aside and whisper into an ear all the other things that were important. The moments and experiences that are more precious than money, or more specifically, earning more money than other people. That in a world of competition, we should judge ourselves by how we help those who lose, not how we worship those who win, because it's inevitable that some must lose in order for others to win – the notion that anyone can make it to the top if they just work hard enough does not mean everyone can. We can't blame these people for a fatalistic system that we created. The winners don't just write history, they write the present and the future, and right now their writing stinks worse than her ex-husband's novels. But she couldn't do any of that. She just had to nod and listen to them lie about their experience and tell her that they worked really well as part of a team, but were also a natural leader.

Then, at the end of the day, a slightly untidy woman came in. She'd done everything by the book. Smart black heels, grey skirt, white blouse, hair scraped up into a bun, but there was something a little off about it all. Perhaps it was the barely concealed puffiness under the eyes, or the worry lines tucked away in the corners of her face, or the shine on the shoes that looked a bit too fresh and hurried. Marianne rose and stretched out a hand, as she heard the woman say her name was 'Nicky Hainsworth' and that she was pleased to meet her. When their hands met, she saw a man she loved, a man she felt she couldn't live without. He was angry. He was angry with her again. She felt the bruises from yesterday tingle in anticipation and then he grabbed her hair and pulled her into the middle of the room before taking off his belt. She felt the sting of it, but at the same time felt a distant kind of gratitude towards him for avoiding her stomach. He wouldn't touch the baby. Then she was stood outside a shabby-looking block of flats. A small boy next her with his hand in hers. In her other hand she was holding a modest bag, heavy with all the belongings she could carry. They were lucky; a space had just opened up for them in the hostel. She didn't have the time or the energy to think about who else they might have to turn away so that they could stay here. At least temporarily. She didn't like to think of herself as homeless, no matter what the forms said. She was making a new life.

Marianne pulled herself back into the interview. 'Right, if you'd like to take a seat, Nicky, we just have a few questions'.

The interview didn't go well. There were huge gaps in Nicky's CV and she became flustered and evasive when asked about them. She was confused by some of the questions and only satisfied the most minimal of the job criteria. Nicky knew this and left the room looking both crushed and embarrassed. Marianne felt invigorated.

'I think we should hire her'.

'What?' Her colleague, Ryan, looked at her as though she'd gone mad. 'Her? But she was probably the least qualified for the job. What would we do with her?'

'I think we should give her a shot. I saw something in her. I think she could be great for us.' Marianne wanted to shout, to scream at this man who didn't get it; she wanted to say "Why not, what could go wrong? Everything's wrong already, can't you see that? We're lucky and have nice things and nice lives so we don't give a shit about people who don't have nice things or nice lives, especially because we're told they're the ones who are going to take our things or mess up our lives. We often reassure ourselves by saying that we worked hard for it but really we have no idea, we think we do, but if we really did then we wouldn't be acting this way. We wouldn't be letting these things happen. We wouldn't be abandoning people like this. Would we?"

But, instead, Marianne just smiled, went back to her office and started drafting a letter of congratulations to Ms Hainsworth. She could do this. She could do this one thing, for now.