

A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 2

Max Turner – Publisher
Rhiannon Wood – Editor in Chief
Sarah Boyd – Editor

For this issue a loose theme came together of the haunted and the haunting.
Of the spooky and surreal. This image seemed to fit the bill.

Cover Image – ‘Beneath’ by anon

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Foreword**Page 5****Mooncalf Triptych by Christina Ladd****Page 7***Three reactions to an unusual calf's birth*

Christina Ladd is a writer, reviewer, and librarian. She will eventually die crushed under a pile of books, but until then she survives on a worrisome amount of tea and pizza. You can read more of her work at Strange Horizons, Vastarien, Speculative North, and others. You can also find her on Twitter @OLaddieGirl.

The Hard-Boiled Detective Agency by Melissa Llanes Brownlee**Page 12***Detective, Humpty Dumpty, has a murder to solve.*

Melissa Llanes Brownlee (she/her), a native Hawaiian writer, living in Japan, has fiction in Booth, Pleiades, The Citron Review, Waxwing, Milk Candy Review, Claw & Blossom, Bending Genres, (mac)ro(mic), Necessary Fiction, HAD, The Birdseed, Bandit Fiction and Best Small Fictions 2021. Hard Skin, her short story collection, will be coming soon from Juventud Press. She tweets @lumchanmfa and talks story at www.melissallanesbrownlee.com.

The Hairdresser's Girl by S.L.W.**Page 13***Revisiting the hairdresser's store and realising it's time to move on.*

S.L.W. is a biracial teen writer from Ontario, Canada. Her work has been previously published in Southchild Lit and Ice Lolly Review. You can find her on Twitter @slwwrites.

The Journal by B. E. Austin**Page 15***Virginia visits her brother in the hospital, but a monster lurks in the empty halls.*

B. E. Austin was born and lives in North Carolina, USA. She is a disabled, queer person who has been writing since she was old enough to hold a pencil and imagining stories for as long as she can remember.

Anything can happen in London on a Friday, from coffee at the RA to killing with consent.

Cate trained in Fine Art and graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from Manchester Metropolitan University in 2019. She was shortlisted for York Festival of Writing's Friday Night Live Competition and long listed for Mslexia's Novel Competition in 2019. Cate teaches Creative Writing and is passionate about outsider narratives. She lives and works in the Midlands and was selected for Writing West Midlands' development scheme, Room 204, in 2021.

Publications: 'The Blue Pool' in 'The Invisible Collection', ed Nicholas Royle, Nightjar Press 2020; 'Imbolc', Lunate, 2021, 'Underworld', Janus Literary, 2021.

You can find her on Twitter @c8west.

Foreword

The nights are getting darker. The owls are getting louder, and the moon is gleaming brightly in the night sky. Pumpkins adorn the windows and front gardens of houses. Protecting and scaring, teasing with their soft yet jagged teeth and shining, leathery skin. Inside, a bright orange cavern lit with a single flame. The wind is cold in the clear, dark sky. The graveyards are singing. It's the perfect moment for a ghostly tale or two. We have loved getting the thrill of a shiver down our spines this month and very much hope you all do, too.

For this issue, we have swung our net out in search of the surreal, the dangerous and the hauntingly unfamiliar. Who doesn't love a good blood-drenched ghost story? Who isn't simultaneously enthralled and terrified at the thought of an empty, badly lit hospital corridor with something flickering, lurking and shining at the end? Who wouldn't want to cast a spell under the moonlight, save a magical creature and stay young forever? What about Alice? Her rabbit hole of horrors is always waiting, especially at the bottom of a spicy vodka bottle...

Drink me, it whispers... Don't forget to always be wary of mirrors and what they hold.

Sometimes it's more than a reflection. And then there are strangers with odd requests who you meet on a freaky Friday. If you go with them, who knows where you might wake up... just ask Alice, but maybe not Jack.

There is something wonderfully primal about being scared. It's a little addictive. As a child with my brother, I remember many evenings when he forced me to watch such classics as *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Halloween*. Of course, if I'd wanted to, I'm sure I could have escaped, yet I couldn't quite tear my eyes away. This despite knowing the next time my mum sent me down the dark hallway to the chest freezer, I would do it running like I had Freddie on my tail, half-expecting a fountain of blood to engulf me as I opened the freezer door! That

feeling of being so scared you can feel your bones shaking under your skin is something we all still try to find as adults sometimes.

Our cover this month reminded me of *It* – the original one with Tim Curry is still the best for me – how that film and book gave a whole generation of kids clown-phobia. Yet it also captured those long, magical summers spent on your bike, exploring, getting into trouble with friends you assumed would be in your life forever. As I look at that lovely head of hair peering through the grate below them, I feel both melancholy memory bubbling in my heart and a shiver of fear sliding down my spine. I can almost see the white-gloved fingers as they grasp the grate, ready to snatch...

We all long for that wonder we felt as kids, that pure sense of mystery. It's the best thing about writing and reading, crafting a world or being pulled back to that magical place where everything is a mystery ready to be explored. So go forth and explore. We'll be waiting for you at the end of the dark hallway with something in our hands... It could be a knife dripping with blood or a bag of candy. Take the risk... go on... you know you want to...

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Mooncalf Triptych

by Christina Ladd

Content Warnings: Death

Not your thing? Skip to page 12 for the next story.

1.

Once upon a time, a mooncalf was born to a poor farmer's only cow. The thing was wretched to behold, with two half-formed faces growing opposite one another from the same place in its skull, and one foreleg short and spindly, terminating in an in-turned knob. The farmer prayed that it was dead, but it lowed, high and soft. It tried to rise on its malformed limb and stumbled, the same as if the farmer had tried to lift himself up by putting his weight on his wrist.

The mother turned around and began to lick its head.

The farmer knew he should burn the creature and dump its ashes in a deep, dark part of the forest. However, he was so poor that he could not afford for it to go to waste. So he cut off its head and its malformed leg and threw them in the midden, for the earth was frozen with frost. Then he cooked up the rest. His family ate very well, and his children survived the winter, while the children of many other poor farmers did not.

The mother cow, forlorn and bewildered by the lingering scent of her newborn, began alternately to dig at the midden or to pace her grazing ground. She would sometimes break the fence of her enclosure and go wandering over the fields.

One morning, the cow wandered into a neighbour's land. It did not eat the new shoots of grain but only went pacing to and fro. The neighbour found this strange, and when he brought the cow back, he resolved to spy. He found the farm near-identical to his own, threadbare and splintering. So why should they survive so well while his own family suffered? His littlest daughter was in the ground, and his eldest, too.

The cow began to dig at the midden, and the neighbour followed her. There in the stink, he found the terrible skull and the malformed foreleg like a witch's wand.

He took the bones and showed them to the men of the village. Swift as rumour, they banded together and burned their neighbour and his family in their home. Then they divided his lands between them and what possessions had not gone up in flame. They could not decide, however, what should become of the cow. Some argued that it, too, should be burnt, for it had birthed an abomination. But others said it had led them to the witchery and was therefore innocent.

As a compromise, they killed the mother cow and divided her up among them, and what children remained to them were healthier, for a little while.

2.

Once upon a time, there was a mooncalf born to a poor farmer's only cow. Despite the cow and the bull being russet, the only part of the calf that was red were its eyes. The rest of its body was white and knobby like deep roots. The knots were thickest along its spine, lumps obviously akimbo even while still coated in the thick birth slime. The farmer prayed that it was dead, but it lowed, high and soft.

The mother turned around and began to lick its head.

The farmer knew he should burn the creature and dump its ashes in a deep, dark part of the forest. However, he could not bring himself to be so wasteful. So he allowed the calf to live and hoped that it would grow strong enough to pull his plough despite its deformities.

Soon winter was upon the land. The farmer was so poor that he brought his animals inside the house, as much to ensure that his children didn't freeze as to protect the cows. His daughter was afraid of the mooncalf, but he soon found his son asleep beside it. In the morning, the strange whiteness of the mooncalf seemed to him like the dazzling snow outside, terrible but beautiful, too.

Thenceforth on cold nights, the family slept between the cows. They were very warm, and though they were hungry, the children survived the winter, while the children of many other poor farmers did not.

His neighbours blessed the poor farmer's good fortune to his face and cursed it behind his back. They were poor farmers, too.

The mooncalf grew and grew into a fine young bull and soon could pull a plough at great speed. The nubs of flesh and stubs of bone grew along with it, but the family no longer paid them any mind. They tended their fields and harvested them in due time, and the mooncalf eased their burdens.

When winter came again, they found themselves certain they would survive the season and rejoiced. They even brought the cow and the mooncalf inside to warm their revels and gave them sweet apples along with the children.

A neighbour heard the commotion on his way home from the village and snuck closer to see the cause. He cried out when he saw the mooncalf being brought inside, its rippling white flesh like mushrooms engulfing a dead tree.

The neighbour told others what he had seen. Then he led them to the house where they could see for themselves. They went with torches raised, and once they had satisfied themselves that the mooncalf was as wicked-looking as promised, they set the house to burn. But the mooncalf raised its head and moaned, a high and eerie sound. And it would not stop, nor would it cease prancing and jabbing until the family had to flee its mad capering.

The family ran out of the house just in time to see the thatching collapse in a cloud of sparks.

The neighbours were stunned by the appearance of the mooncalf but found their wits in time to surround the family. They advanced until the mooncalf, who was white as rushing waters, stepped in front of them.

It planted itself firmly and drew up to full height. The strange lumps all along its back protruded like dragon spines.

Then the mooncalf charged. It tore into the crowd with flashing hooves and trampled all who stood staring. And as the rest tried to flee, it chased them down with powerful strides and ground them into the earth.

When it was finished, its fierce gallop became a meek trot, and it returned to the family with shy eyes.

The family, who had stumbled from sleep into a succession of events less believable than nightmares, stood frozen. The cow, however, stepped forward and licked the mooncalf's head. And the mooncalf submitted to it.

Then the son went and patted the mooncalf's side. 'Good horsie,' he said.

'We cannot stay here,' said the poor farmer's wife, recovering the thread of her wits. 'They will come for us.'

'We must give them the mooncalf,' said the poor farmer.

'It protected us!' his daughter cried.

'And the town will not be satisfied with its death alone,' his wife added.

'What can we do? How will we live?' wondered the poor farmer.

'We have our stores,' said the daughter. 'We have a cart.'

And so they put all the surviving stores from their home in the cart hitched to the mooncalf. Then, for good measure, they took the stores from their neighbour's farm since he would no longer need them.

Then they began to walk until they reached the deep, dark part of the forest. And maybe they are still there, protecting and protected by the terrible mooncalf.

3.

Once upon a time, there was a mooncalf born to a poor farmer's only cow. The creature was finely formed from tail to shoulder, but its head was unnaturally large, and its eyes were shallow pits. Instead, it had a single eye in the centre of its forehead.

Out of pity, the farmer snatched the mooncalf up before its mother could so much as lick its head. He dealt it the mercy blow and burned the body until the bones cracked and crumbled. Then he collected the ashes and took them to the deep, dark part of the forest.

The ashes were in an old rag he had thought to discard. But when he was about to leave it, he thought it might yet make a patch for a shirt or at least a little extra insulation for a coat.

When he went to shake out the ashes, a voice cried, 'Stop!'

He whirled around to find an old woman hobbling toward him. He made the sign against evil over his chest; the woman was obviously a witch.

'Do not spill the ashes here. They will sink into the soil, and the plants will grow strange, and the waters will run with sour magic.'

Though she was undoubtedly wicked, the poor farmer saw the sense in that. 'What should I do?'

'Give them to me.'

But the poor farmer did not like to think what a witch would do with them.

The witch sighed, seeing his hesitation. 'I will only make soap from them. Soap is a clean thing; it cannot be wicked.'

But the poor farmer went with her to see that it would indeed be done as she said. He watched her boil the ashes in her pot with scraps of fat and insisted she put in nothing else, not even the sweet vervain, to make a better smell.

When the mixture cooled, the witch scraped out the soap and gave half to the poor farmer.

'Let me see you use it first,' he said.

The witch sighed again. Then she proceeded to wash a kitchen rag in a little bowl. The cloth came out clean. So did the witch's hands, young and pliant as a dairymaid's. Both of them gasped.

Very slowly, the witch broke off another portion and pushed it toward the poor farmer. She had left herself only enough to lather her own body if she were careful.

The farmer understood. He would not speak of this and would bring the soap home to his family. After all, it was clean magic, not evil. Probably.

'What will we do?' he asked his wife.

'If we use it, they will burn us for witches. And even if they don't, we will only grow old again on this miserable plot of land. Let's sell it,' she said.

They went to the baronet and demonstrated the soap's power by using a sliver. He was greatly amazed and paid them enough to live well for a full year. Then the baronet gave half the soap to his wife and half to his mistress.

The next winter, a plague struck the whole region. Rich or poor or in-between made no difference: all died. Except for the baronet's mistress, who had long since taken her young new face and found a richer teat.

The Hard-Boiled Detective Agency

by Melissa Llanes Brownlee

Content Warnings: Dead body, drinking, drug use

Not your thing? Skip to page 13 for the next story.

There was a loud thud against the office door, waking Hump from a nightmare filled with high walls, frying pans and fire. He rolled unevenly out of the cot in the corner of his office. His tie had become his belt again, and he pushed it up closer to his swollen eyes. Another night of drunken oblivion, he thought, too many vodka, tabasco and mayo shots. He liked to devil himself whenever possible. Maybe tomorrow, he'd try some scorpion sauce, really spice things up.

He could already hear his secretary, Alice, as she mumbled through her edibles, 'one day, you are going to be too delicious for anyone to take seriously.' He doubted that a few sprinkles of hot sauce would do much to change him now, especially not after the Cheshire case. Damn that cat. And damn Alice for letting him in the office in the first place. That girl would do anything for good shrooms.

He wobbled to the door, checking under it for any creature-sized shadows. You could never be too careful. He should have a peephole installed, but he could barely afford the rent and didn't want to owe the Caterpillar any more than he already did, so no more loans from that smoking shark. He slowly cracked the door, pushing it open with the steel tip of his boot. A red hatbox rolled over, revealing a big, black tag covered in swirling silver writing addressed to Alice. Its lid had been loosened by the impact against his door, spilling a tall, purple hat filled with flaming orange hair, large, staring eyes, and tea-stained teeth. Oh, Alice wasn't going to be happy that someone had decided her ex would make a good present.

The Hairdresser's Girl

by S.L.W.

Content Warnings: Mention of death

Not your thing? Skip to page 15 for the next story.

The shop is quiet and still. My reflection flickers in the tall mirrors on the sides of the room, even though the lights are off. The floor is bare, the place uninhabited. The hairdresser left to be buried underground four years ago, and no one has shown willing to own the building since.

I reach for the light switch, but the wall is flat and smooth where it used to be. Something skitters across the hardwood floors – either a mouse or her shoes. The hairdresser always did like to wear high-heeled boots and let the flat parts of her soles scrape against the ground.

Her silhouette steps out from behind the shadows. She looks the same as before, and wetness catches at the top of my throat. Without noticing, her absence had brought upon me a drought. I hadn't thought I minded when she first passed from this town and left me behind. She could not have cared for me forever. I, too, could not grieve her forever and so had promised myself not to begin.

I wave; she pulls out a chair for me to sit down. On the desk before me is another mirror, in which I see myself and the mirrors on the walls. The hairdresser thought customers would trust her more if they could watch her hands. I trust her regardless, though. I do.

I tell her she doesn't need to put on gloves; I'm not here for a touch-up. I just want to see her, just miss her, just want to see how she's doing.

She combs through my hair with her fingers, slow and gentle, the way she does to tell me how soft it feels. The first time she told me that, I was six, and my feet couldn't touch the floor when seated. I didn't get what she meant and had to be told it was a compliment. I like hearing those words now.

Her nails scrape against my scalp. It's not on purpose. Metal clangs against the counter; she's fumbling for scissors. With her empty hand, she tugs at a few strands right at

the base of my head. It's a silent question: *Will you let me?* I can't see their colour, not in this dark, but I know what she's referring to. My little grey hairs.

The first time she found them, I must've been sixteen, seventeen. She asked if she could pull them out. Her own hair was dyed; she hid her grey hairs like they were something to fear. I thought the notion ridiculous and declined her offer.

Now, I don't tell her to stop. She snips away, rhythm inconsistent. Once done, she sets the scissors back down on the counter and smooths my hair. The blade, barely kept afloat by the handle's plastic, teeters. She ruffles my hair, messing up her work, and pulls the chair back so I can leave, almost as if saying, 'Go on now, you've spent your time here.'

The Journal

by B.E. Austin

Content Warnings: Blood, Off-Screen Violence, Minor Violence Against a Child, Depictions of Mental Illness

Not your thing? Skip to page 27 for the next story.

The emptiness of the waiting room engulfed Virginia. No one sat behind the glass. Virginia hugged her package to her chest. Her eyes darted to the sign by the iron door. Wexler's State Hospital for Insane Youths. She had been sitting here for over an hour, listening to the clock tick on the far wall. The wall was white. All the walls were white here. She had come to visit her brother, Jack, to bring him his present. Her eyes moved to the iron door itself. As she watched, the door creaked open, and a fluorescent light shone from the empty hall. Virginia stared at it and placed the package into her bag, tiptoeing over to the door. She eased it open. The hinges groaned, and she froze. Silence. She slid through the gap she'd made, then eased the door shut behind her. The lock clicked, and Virginia gulped. She made her way down the white hall.

Virginia had come to the hospital many times, but an adult had always led her back and forth from the waiting room to Jack's room or Uncle Edwin's office. In the hospital, they didn't call her uncle by his name, Edwin. They called him Dr Walsh, and he was in charge of the hospital. Uncle Edwin frightened her sometimes. The quiet, frigid man had eyes like stone, a mountain with snow on top. He always spoke seriously about Jack's progress, but he was a liar. Virginia knew that all the things he said about Jack were lies. Her parents knew it too. Maybe that was why they didn't come anymore.

She heard footsteps and ducked behind a cart full of medical supplies. A nurse in a white smock and a hat walked past, heels clicking on the tile. When she had gone, Virginia stood up and dusted off her dress. She couldn't afford to get caught by any adults. She kept going.

She had to hide two more times before she heard real noise. She hid again, this time sliding all the way behind an open door. Virginia was small for her age, and she put that to

good use. She could hear a boy screaming, and the sound was drawing nearer. Jack didn't scream, so that couldn't be him. Virginia tensed up at the sound of Uncle Edwin's voice over the screaming.

'Walter, we gave you the doll to help you cope, not to feed into your delusions.' His voice sounded the way the empty, white halls of the hospital looked. Dark shapes passed Virginia's hiding place.

'Give him back! Give him back! You can't take Eugene away!' The boy screamed and thrashed like an animal. Virginia could see their shadows on the wall across from her. The boy, taller than her and skinny, fought Uncle Edwin's one-handed grip on both his wrists. In Uncle Edwin's other hand, he held an indistinct shape out of the boy's reach.

'Nurse,' Uncle Edwin said, voice strained. The boy must be stronger than his skinny shadow let on. A less distinct shadow took the shape from Uncle Edwin, and the boy screamed again.

'Give Eugene back! Give him back! That's my brother!' Virginia didn't dare move. Her heart pounded in her chest.

'That is a rubber doll, Walter.' Uncle Edwin's shadow pulled open the door next to Virginia's hiding place and tossed the screaming, struggling boy inside. 'Your brother is dead.' He slammed the door and pulled a ring of keys off his belt. His shadow locked the door as banging joined the muffled screaming. 'Nurse, get rid of the doll and make a note on his chart that we're changing approaches in his treatment.'

'Yes, Doctor.' The nurse's shadow was no longer visible, her voice young and bored.

'Where is Gladys?'

'She said she was, uh, dealing with a mess on Floor One.' A specific emotion skulked behind the nurse's voice. Virginia couldn't pinpoint it. Uncle Edwin scoffed.

'A mess, yes. They're daily at this point.' Uncle Edwin moved into her line of sight with his back to her. He put the hand holding the key ring on the wall as if bracing himself. He used his other hand to push up his glasses and cover his eyes. He stood, hunched over, motionless. The only sound in the hallway was the screaming from the room next to Virginia. Uncle Edwin stayed that way until Virginia felt a bead of sweat dripping down her forehead. He straightened up and put the keys on his belt. He straightened his glasses. 'I'm doing what's best for him.' His voice was barely audible above the wailing, but Virginia heard him. 'That will be all, Nurse,' he said louder.

'Yes, Doctor.' His footsteps disappeared down the hall. The nurse grumbled to herself, walking past Virginia's hiding place. She held a naked, rubber baby by the head. A

thin, pink ribbon held her hair in place, straining under the weight. The nurse gave no reaction to the wailing and banging on the door behind her, walking at a steady pace. A small radio on her belt crackled.

Helen, the girl is having another fit, a woman's voice frizzled through the radio on an angry sigh. The nurse swore, putting the doll down roughly on the front of the desk at the end of the hall. She stormed off, her hair and the ribbon bouncing as she left.

Virginia waited until she couldn't hear anything but the muffled keening from inside the room. She padded down the hallway and grabbed the doll. She held it to her chest like a real baby as she tiptoed back and knocked on the door. The screaming subsided to sniffing.

'I have your doll,' she said into the keyhole.

'You have Eugene?'

'Yes, I have him here. Let me unlock your door.'

'Are you an angel?'

'No, my name is Virginia. Wait just a moment.' Virginia took a pin out of her hair and jostled it in the lock. She had to put the doll down on the floor to do it, but after a few minutes, the lock clicked, and the door opened. A pair of brown eyes peeked out, red-rimmed with crying.

'Eugene?' Walter croaked. She held out the doll to him. He grabbed it, cradling it to his chest and pressing his face against the rubber head, sobbing softly. All she could see of him was a mop of unkempt brown hair and skinny arms with bruises and sores around the wrists. On his arm, a bruise swelled in the shape of an adult hand. 'Thank you, thank you, thank you,' he said. He lifted his head from the doll. He had a long face and bloody red lines carved down his cheeks. Blood and skin caked his fingernails. 'Thank you for bringing Eugene back to me, Miss. You really are an angel,' he said. Virginia looked at his claw-marked cheeks and thought about what Uncle Edwin had said.

'You take really good care of your brother,' she told him. Walter's face crumpled, then his mouth twisted in anger.

'The doctors and nurses think I'm stupid,' he said. Something lurked in his eyes that Virginia didn't like. 'They think that I think that this is actually—' He cut himself short. His mouth tightened more. 'I know it's a doll. It's rubber. It's...'. He took a deep breath. 'But it *is* Eugene, even if they can't see it. He's come back to me. When I have the doll, it's like I can hear his voice again. I just want to hear his voice again. I don't want to be alone.' Walter's voice cracked. 'There's nothing wrong with that, is there?'

'No,' Virginia said. 'There's nothing wrong with that.'

‘If there’s anything I can do to help you, Miss, I will. I swear it.’

Virginia stepped closer.

‘I’m looking for my brother, Jack. He lives here. I’m going to go up and check his room, but he’s probably not there. Have you seen him?’

‘I don’t know. There’s a lot of boys named Jack here.’

‘His name is Jack Hudnall. He’s tall and skinny and has black hair. He turned sixteen this year. His eyes are blue.’

‘Umm... oh, do you mean the boy who’s always with Dr Walsh? He’s Dr Walsh’s nephew.’

‘Yes. That’s him. Have you seen him today?’

‘No, I haven’t, but Ruth knows where he is. Ruth knows everything that goes on here. She can see and hear everything. She’s up on the second floor. It’s after lunch, so she’ll be in her chair in the parlour.’

‘Okay, thank you. I’ll try to find her.’

‘Good luck. And be careful of the monster,’ Walter told her.

‘The monster?’

‘The monster in the halls. Everyone knows about the monster. It doesn’t usually kill patients, but you’re not a patient, so be careful.’

‘Okay, I will,’ Virginia said.

‘Good luck,’ Walter said again. He glanced around before pulling the door shut. Virginia looked around too. No one. She walked down the hall towards the stairs, then stopped outside the door. In the corner, a muddy brown stain marred the white floor and crept up the white wall, stretching across the white ceiling and flaking down onto the floor. Virginia knew the colour. That was blood. She looked at it a few seconds before opening the door and walking up the stairs. Behind her, on the desk, a pen rattled.

*

Jack wasn’t in his room. Virginia stood on her tiptoes, peeking through the window. The bed was made, and a neat stack of books sat on the bedside table, under which a chair was perfectly centred. Jack wasn’t there.

‘Are you new? I haven’t seen you before.’

Virginia whirled around. A boy, a bit younger than her, sat in a chair down the hall.

‘No, I’m not a patient. I’m here to see my brother, but I can’t let any grown-ups catch me,’ Virginia said. She didn’t know how she hadn’t seen the boy before. He seemed like a shadow in the white hallway.

‘Why? What can a ghost do to a ghost?’ he said.

Virginia didn’t understand that, so she kept talking. ‘Do you know the boy who stays in this room? Do you know where he is? He’s my brother, and I need to find him.’

‘Ghosts don’t need anything. You’re already dead,’ he said.

‘I’m not a ghost, and I’m not dead,’ Virginia said.

‘Yes, you are. You just don’t know it.’ His words stopped Virginia short.

‘I would know if I was a ghost. I wouldn’t be able to touch things or pick things up or talk to living people. Do you know where my brother is or not?’ she asked.

The boy’s black hair hung over his eyes. ‘Everyone is dead. Everyone in the whole world. Except me.’ He lowered his head.

‘How do you know?’

‘I just do. I’m alone. They’re all ghosts, and they don’t even know it. Even you. Everyone’s gone.’

‘Well, if they’re ghosts, they’re not really gone then, are they?’ Virginia said. The boy said nothing. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Harold.’

‘Well, Harold, if everyone’s a ghost, they’re not really gone. They’re still here, and you can talk to them and be friends with them.’

‘You’re all dead. I’m alone. I’m *alone*,’ he said. Irritation flared in Virginia.

‘If you want to be sad and alone, then fine,’ she said, ‘I don’t have time for you. I have to find Jack.’ She turned away.

‘The monster will get you. He eats ghosts.’

‘Is the monster dead?’ Virginia had no more patience.

Harold didn’t answer immediately. ‘No,’ he said after a moment, ‘He isn’t dead.’

‘Then you’re not alone.’ Virginia flounced off. If he wanted to be miserable by himself, she wouldn’t stop him. She walked past a closet and stopped. Blood seeped out from under the door, forming a crescent pool. Virginia looked at it, then kept walking. She had to find Jack.

*

Virginia climbed to the second floor. Silence hung heavy in the halls. Sometimes, Virginia heard faint sobbing, but she kept walking. She needed to find Ruth, who would help her find Jack. She hoped that Walter had given her trustworthy advice.

Virginia saw the blood before she saw the body.

Blood pooled in the middle of the hallway. Virginia stopped. She saw the drips of blood from above, and she lifted her head, eyes moving up. Two metal rods, embedded in flesh and the ceiling's plaster, held the nurse's body aloft. Her arms, legs, and head hung lifeless. Blood dribbled down the rods. It dripped from the tips of her nails, and the *drip, drip, drip* filled the silence. A pink ribbon dangled from the nurse's hair.

Virginia stood and stared. When she felt that she could, she looked away. She stepped around the puddle without looking up. She continued on. She didn't walk very far before a voice stopped her.

'You're Jack's sister.'

Virginia looked up. Through a doorway, in a small lounge, a girl sat in a chair.

'Are you Ruth?' Virginia asked. The girl was older than Virginia but not as old as Jack. Straps on her legs and chest held her taut against the chair. A tray across her lap held paper and crayons. The straps left her enough mobility to use her arms.

'Yes. Walter told you about me,' the girl said. Virginia walked into the lounge. 'You saw the nurse.' Virginia stopped.

'...Yes.'

'Did it upset you?'

'A little bit.' Virginia looked away.

'You've seen a lot of bad things, haven't you, Virginia?' Ruth's blonde hair fell to her shoulders in waves. Her blue eyes knew many things.

'How do you know my name?'

'Jack told me.' As Virginia stepped closer, she could see the drawings on the tray. They looked nicer than anything Virginia could draw.

'You know Jack?' Virginia touched the bag resting at her hip, which still held the package.

'Jack spends a lot of time on the second floor. Have you wondered why it was so easy for you to get up here, why there are so few doctors and nurses and guards?' The question was abrupt to Virginia's ears. She didn't answer. 'You already know why, don't you?'

'You ask a lot of questions,' Virginia said. Ruth smiled, snaggle-toothed.

'I like to know things.'

‘How did you know that I talked to Walter?’

‘I see and hear everything in the hospital. I’m not strong enough to know about other places, just the hospital. They keep me strapped to this chair all the time, so I have nothing else to do but watch,’ Ruth said.

‘Why do they keep you strapped to the chair?’

‘I have fits all the time, and the medicines don’t help. They have to strap me to the chair so I don’t hurt myself. The nurse, Miss Helen. She’s the one who stayed with me during the fit I just had. I didn’t like her much. I knew she’d be the next to die.’ Ruth sighed, and then she had a far-off, sad look in her eyes.

‘I didn’t like her either. She took away Walter’s doll.’ Virginia paused. ‘Where is Jack?’

‘Walter and Harold warned you about the monster. You’ve seen the blood. You’ve seen the nurse. Are you afraid to meet the monster?’ Ruth’s eyes clutched Virginia, not letting her go.

‘No.’ They stared at each other, and an understanding passed between them.

‘What are you afraid of?’

‘I’m scared that the grown-ups will catch me, and I won’t be able to see Jack,’ Virginia said.

‘What are you really afraid of?’ Ruth asked.

‘I don’t think that’s any of your business,’ Virginia said. Her skin was cold and damp, despite the warm air.

‘I’m afraid that my parents will stop visiting me. I know it will happen eventually, that I’ll be alone. Walter and Harold’s parents don’t visit them. Your parents don’t visit Jack. One by one, everyone here gets abandoned.’

‘I’ll never abandon Jack,’ Virginia said. ‘Jack won’t be alone. I won’t let him.’ Ruth looked at her for a long time.

‘You’re too good for this place. Good people don’t belong here. But you know this place is evil. You’re too smart not to.’

‘You’re wrong. Not everyone here is bad.’

‘Aren’t we? Walter, who was supposed to be watching his brother but was too busy playing marbles to notice him drowning in the river? Harold, who stabbed his teacher in his throat and thinks he killed everyone else in the world? The doctors who only care about getting funding from the state, and the nurses who only care about getting paid?’ She paused. ‘Jack?’

‘What about you?’ Virginia asked. Ruth gave her a smile that had seen far too much. ‘I’m not innocent either,’ she said. ‘None of us are here because we’re crazy. We’re here to suffer. This is our punishment. That’s what it is to be alone.’

‘Where is my brother?’ Virginia asked.

‘Why are you so loyal, Virginia?’

‘Where is my brother?’ Virginia asked louder, no longer caring who heard.

‘Leave this room and go the opposite way from the nurse. At the end of the hall, go left. It’s the third door on the right. The door will be unlocked. He knows you’re coming.’

‘Thank you,’ Virginia said. She turned and walked away.

‘Virginia,’ Ruth said. Virginia stopped. ‘After you talk to Jack, leave this place. Leave this place and never look back.’ Virginia didn’t answer.

*

Virginia knocked on the door before opening it. The room had a tall table in the middle and several lamps crowded around it, pointing down. The lifeless bulbs reflected movement on the other side of the room. Tables with drawers and medical instruments lined the walls. Jack stood in the corner, his back to her, washing his hands.

‘Hello, Ginny,’ he said without looking up. Pink water spiralled down the drain. His entire forearms dripped with blood. It wasn’t his blood.

‘Hello, Jack,’ Virginia said. Only Jack called her Ginny.

‘You’ve had quite the journey, haven’t you?’ Jack kept his eyes on the sink, methodically rinsing the blood from his hands and arms.

‘You were the one who opened the door, weren’t you?’ she said. She could only see the side of his face as it creased in a smile. He had black hair down to his ears and a lean face.

‘You’re a clever girl. I wanted to see how well you could avoid the doctors and nurses. Challenges are good for the mind.’

As Virginia moved closer, she realised that he had blood flecked across his face and in his hair too. She wondered if he noticed.

‘I brought you something. A present.’ Virginia pulled the package out of her bag, wrapped in plain brown paper, tied with a white ribbon. An invisible force pulled it from her hands, into the air. The package floated over to Jack as he dried his hands. Pink stains mottled the white towel. He took the package, sliding his fingers under the folded paper, untucking it. He unwrapped the package without the slightest rip. Doing so revealed a black, cloth-bound

book with a small, white fleur-de-lis hand-embroidered on the top corner. 'It's a journal. I made it myself. I remember you always kept one at home, but they took it away when you came here.'

Jack turned the journal over in his hands, touching the fleur-de-lis on the other side.

'Thank you, Ginny,' he said, voice soft, 'I appreciate this.'

Virginia smiled, but her eyes slid to the red smears on the side of the sink.

'I thought it might help you—' she stared at one of the smears darkening as it dried '—I know being here must be...' Her voice trailed off. She wasn't sure what she'd planned on saying. She looked back at Jack. He watched her.

'Why are you here, Ginny?' he asked. His voice held no anger. No happiness, no sadness, no fear. It was just a question. Virginia looked at the journal in his hands.

'To bring you the journal,' she said. Jack said nothing. His impassive eyes contained many things she didn't understand. 'To visit you.' Still, Jack said nothing. 'I don't want you to be alone.'

'You saw the nurse.'

'Yes. Miss Helen.'

'Did that upset you?' Jack sounded like Ruth now.

'A little bit.' The same answer she gave Ruth.

'You've seen me leave a lot of bodies behind.' It wasn't a question.

'Yes.' Virginia brushed her hair away from where it stuck to her cheek in the damp air. She hadn't noticed the mugginess of the room before.

'You don't seem upset,' Jack said. Virginia didn't answer. 'You're the last one,' he said. He turned the journal over in his hands. Virginia watched that instead of his face. 'Our mother and father don't visit anymore. Edwin is no more than a captive at this point.' Jack chuckled, eyes focusing somewhere above Virginia's head. He looked back at her. His expression darkened. 'Why do you keep coming back? Of all of them, why do you still care?'

'Because you're my brother, and I love you no matter what,' Virginia said.

'And you don't want me to be alone.' The flecks of blood on Jack's face and hair had dried to a dull maroon-brown.

'Right,' she said. Jack's eyes contained deep, tumultuous oceans. Sharks prowled below the surface.

'Are you afraid of being alone?' the sharks asked. Virginia's eyes narrowed, and the tips of her ears turned red.

‘Does it matter?’ she asked in a shark-hunting voice. Jack threw back his head and laughed. The noise startled Virginia. It was too loud for the muted room.

‘I suppose it doesn’t, little sister. I suppose it doesn’t.’ His teeth gleamed as he laughed, a touch too sharp. He looked at her. The sharks rose to the surface of the ocean, gnashing their teeth. ‘You could stay here. Then you wouldn’t have to worry about me being alone.’ Virginia shook her head. ‘I’d make Edwin give you the best room, the best food. You could mingle with the children who get treated better, the ones whose families donate. We could spend more time together.’

‘No.’ Virginia remembered Ruth’s parting admonition.

‘You’re sure?’ Jack asked. The sharks writhed in the water, waiting for an answer.

‘I’m sure,’ she said, and the sharks submerged again. The door heaved open.

‘Two in one day. Well, I hope you’re pleased with—Virginia!’ Uncle Edwin’s expression jolted from disgusted to horrified. ‘Virginia, little one, what are you doing here?’ His eyes shot to Jack, who showed his teeth.

‘Edwin, there you are. Would you escort my sister back to the waiting room?’ Jack said with a tranquil smile.

‘Hello, Uncle Edwin,’ Virginia said. Uncle Edwin’s eyes twitched back and forth between Virginia and her brother, pulled by some invisible force.

‘Virginia, how did you get up here? You shouldn’t be up here.’ His voice was tense with worry.

‘I had been waiting a really long time, and the big door was open,’ Virginia said. She closed her bag and clasped her hands in front of her.

‘Virginia, dearest, you should have told the nurse at the front who you were and waited for me to come get you.’ Uncle Edwin put his hands on his knees to look at her. Tired eyes met hers through the thick frames of his glasses.

‘There was no nurse at the front. I waited for an hour,’ Virginia told him. Uncle Edwin faltered. He looked up at Jack. Virginia didn’t have to look at Jack to know he was smiling.

‘Virginia’s had a long day. You should escort her back to the waiting room.’

Virginia knew that soft tone in Jack’s voice and Uncle Edwin did too. He straightened up, and for a moment, it looked like he would lash out at Jack, give the boy a piece of his mind. Instead, he deflated and turned back to Virginia.

‘Let’s go, my dear. This is no place for a nice, normal girl like you to go unsupervised.’ He seemed to Virginia to be shrivelled, a once lush plant under the unforgiving winter sun. He offered his hand, and Virginia took it.

‘Goodbye, Ginny,’ the monster said. He appeared calm, but the sharks grinned at them with glittering teeth.

‘Goodbye, Jack,’ Virginia said. Uncle Edwin led her out the door. Before they went, he shot a look at Jack that Virginia wasn’t supposed to see. Helpless hatred smouldered in his eyes. He led Virginia along and closed the door behind them with a clang.

*

The halls were even quieter now than when Virginia had walked them alone. She walked with Uncle Edwin, letting him hold her hand. That seemed to make him feel better. He guided her around the long way, avoiding the hall where the nurse still leaked blood.

‘Virginia,’ he said. His voice reminded her of the old dog that lived down the street. It laid on the unkempt lawn all day and stared at her with cloudy, red-rimmed eyes. ‘Virginia,’ Uncle Edwin said again, ‘When you came up here to find your brother, did you... see anything upsetting?’ He looked down at her as they reached the stairs. Virginia thought of Walter shrieking in his room, then she realized that he was talking about the nurse. They stopped walking, and Virginia looked up into her uncle’s eyes. Maybe he had been cold once, but relentless fear and pain had melted that facade.

‘Not really,’ she said, ‘but sometimes I heard crying from inside the rooms.’

He relaxed. ‘You don’t need to worry about that. Some of the patients become hysterical at times.’ They continued down the stairs. ‘But you must wait for me to come and get you when you visit. Hospitals aren’t safe for little girls to wander alone.’

‘Are they safe for the patients?’ Virginia asked. Uncle Edwin grimaced.

‘We do our best. We keep the children in their rooms so they’ll be safe. It’s all we can do at this point.’ Fatigue weighed him down. He led her down to the ground floor and out into the waiting room. ‘We appreciate you coming to visit your brother, but you need to remember this is a hospital.’ She let go of his hand. ‘The children here, they’re sick. They’re all very sick.’

‘Like Jack?’ she asked.

He sighed, closing his eyes. ‘Yes. Especially Jack.’ He opened them. ‘Virginia—’ he didn’t say anything for a few seconds ‘—I know you love your brother very much, but if you

ever don't want to come back here, don't want to have to see Jack again... you don't have to. Do you understand?'

The metal door opened.

'Dr Walsh?' a woman's voice said. Uncle Edwin turned.

'Yes, coming,' he said. He turned back to Virginia, 'You can get home on your own?'

Virginia nodded. 'Alright, I have to go now. Goodbye, Virginia.'

'Bye, Uncle Edwin,' she said, and he left.

The waiting room wasn't silent anymore. A fan whirred somewhere, and a nurse sat behind the glass, reading a magazine. Virginia turned and walked out the front door. The chill autumn air hit her as soon as she stepped out. The world outside the hospital hummed with life, the fallen leaves providing splashes of colour all around her. The hospital loomed behind Virginia as she walked towards the bus stop, but she didn't look back.

Hopefully, next month's visit wouldn't be so hectic.

Friday

by Cate West

Content Warnings: Alludes to suicide ideation

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

There is a convention about sharing cafe tables. Anywhere, I mean, not just at the Royal Academy. You avoid it unless you have to. In which case, you approach at a slant, like a bishop, bow your head slightly and raise an eyebrow. ‘May I...?’ you whisper, your voice trailing off apologetically. And then you slither into the empty chair, make like a haunting. You do not look at or speak to your unwilling host again.

‘It is hard, this waiting,’ she says.

An anarchist. Just my luck. I eyeball the foam on my cappuccino, feeling a spurt of rage flicker inside me like a pilot light.

Go away go away go away.

‘So *very* painful. This waiting.’

‘What are you waiting for?’

Stupid, stupid.

She looks at me. I can feel it. I can feel my skin prickle.

‘Well, a train.’

‘I see.’

You wouldn’t normally wait for a train in the coffee shop of the Royal Academy, but I won’t ask any more questions. Leave it there. Enough is enough. It is *my* table. *She* joined *me*! She started it, this talking. I can end it. Even if she carries on talking to herself.

‘I booked a hotel,’ she says. She enunciates precisely. *An ‘otel.*

That hooks me. I look up from my report. Yes, she is telling me this. A stranger. She isn’t going to *beg*, is she?

She doesn’t look like a beggar.

She seems about thirty. Thin. Sharp shoulders wrapped in a fluffy, black coat.

Backcombed hair and shiny, purple lipstick.

Clean.

Smells nice.

Is she pissed?

No. She doesn't seem to be.

Just mad, then.

The cafe is crowded. More so than usual. There is a big Monet exhibit on, and everyone flocks to those. The polite word is accessible, although there's a lot more to Monet than meets the eye.

'Oh,' I reply. *Take that and run with it, bitch.*

The table next to us is rammed with men in suits poking at their smartphones. Their shoulders ripple in the mirror, infinite isosceles. Monet was obsessed with reflections. Monet was faithful. It was Manet who played tricks. I could see her face in there, too, if I tried.

I don't.

'Yes, indeed. I booked a room. I shouldn't even have to be catching a bloody train at all, should I? I was supposed to be in London tonight. Now all I can do is go home and start again. Sucks!'

Hmm. The facade slips, there. She is not all she seems.

At the table by the window is a family, three generations by the look of it, the granny feeding cake to a wispy-looking child in a high chair. The high arches let in a milky light, as if the world is simply made of fog.

It seems that I am stuck. Customers are still queuing by the counter, and no one is in a hurry to leave. I am damned if I'll be pushed out of my only bit of refuge the whole working week by this provincial oddball.

'So, what happened?'

A mistake. I shouldn't encourage her. But it hardly matters now; she's troubled the water. *She has a train to catch*, is my thinking. *She'll be gone soon*. And the weekend is coming. Perhaps, by contributing, I can hurry things along.

'How long will it take you to get to your station? It's busy on the underground today.'

Like it isn't every day.

'Well, I *got* there,' she begins, completely disregarding the travel advice, 'and I went in, and the receptionist said she'd never heard of me! Can you believe? I booked the room literally months ago. Here!'

She reaches into her black, fluffy pocket and thrusts a folded sheet of A4 across the table.

Earls Court Garden Hotel is printed at the top, and sure enough, a booking for a Miss Emma Mae Barrass tonight.

‘Looks fine to me,’ I say. ‘Sure you went to the right hotel?’

‘Oh, yeah. I definitely *went* to the right hotel. The pretty one that overlooks the square. Earls Court Gardens Hotel. With an S. What I didn’t do was *book* the right hotel! I booked the Earls Court Garden Hotel. Without an S. And it’s fair to say it was without a whole other lot of stuff, too. A crime scene in the making, believe me. Wasn’t safe to put your bags down, never mind sleep the night. The room was literally a dungeon, no phone signal, a French window that opened onto a stairwell full of empty vodka bottles and fag butts. No. No way.’

It’s true there are a lot of hotels around Earls Court, many with similar names, and some of them sleazy.

‘I could have been raped in my bed! Or killed! No one would know! I will *not* allow myself to be murdered. So it’s back to the drawing board. I tell you, I planned this trip for months. I could kick myself. They have a room *tomorrow*, for what it’s worth. But nothing tonight.’

‘Isn’t there anyone you could stay with?’

‘The one and only man I know in London is living with a partner who makes him wear a chastity belt and sleep in a dog’s bed.’

‘Does that bother you?’

‘*If Steve has this bloke installed in his bed, in his ONE BEDROOM FLAT, and Steve’s stark bollock naked in a dog’s bed in the sitting room, where do you suppose there’s room for me? The kitchen? Anyway, it’s no good. He’s not allowed visitors.*’

‘Oh my.’

‘Yes, yes. It’s a whole scene. Their owners take them clubbing on leads. Never heard of it, have you? Neither had I.’

‘Steve who?’ I say, hoping it might be my boss Steven, who lives in Nevern Square. Steven is always on my case these days. A portrait of Steven playing fetch in the communal gardens would be worth its weight in gold.

‘So, you see my predicament. Here I am. Waiting.’

I’m not going to feel sorry for you, I think.

I hope I haven’t spoken it.

It's hardly worth going back to work, I decide. It's the last afternoon of the week, after all. I text a brief excuse to the secretary – *administrator* – Sue, about a friend needing help, then I switch my phone off and bury it at the bottom of my briefcase, with my report.

RIP.

'Coming, at all?' I call over my left shoulder.

Reader, I take her home with me. That's how much of a mug I can be.

As soon as we get back to Cricklewood, I open the gin. I'd been thinking of it all morning, sweating away to itself in the fridge without me.

'Like a drink?'

'Oooh, yes please.'

I tilt the bottle, silently assessing.

It's like she can read my mind.

'Do you have an offie round here? I bet you do. I'll get another bottle to keep us going. Least I can do. And what about eating? Shall I find a takeaway? There are lots of curry houses on that main street. Let me treat you. Please. You've been so kind.'

Off she dashes in her fluffy, black coat, leaving her bag on the chair. As soon as I hear the flat door bang, I take another gulp of gin and pull open the zip. You can never be too careful.

Inside – not much. Spare knickers, tights, a toothbrush, a copy of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in paperback, and a kitchen knife.

I used to drink for enjoyment. These days I just drink. Sometimes when I'm walking to the tube on my way to work, I notice blood seeping up from the cracks between the paving slabs, as if this murderous city floats on a crimson blood plain. Blood that no one acknowledges. The woman did well to find me. She must have a sense for these things. I think, *It's like poetry*, and I move, with my gin, to the CD rack. Well, we shall have music wherever we go. Sibelius? Too solemn. Sinatra? No. The Spice Girls? *Really*. Sonny Rollins, Silver. That will do. My rack got muddled. So what? So bloody what? It hardly matters in the scheme of things, does it?

Or maybe it does, maybe I should check it over so that when they find my body, they'll remember how neat I was. Almost perfect. They'll think, *He kept his secret well*. I'll be tragic. Quick, to the M's. Maria Callas!

By the time I buzz my new friend back in, I'm on my third. I feel stupidly optimistic now, and when she holds up carrier bags full of gin and tikka masala, I feel we really are going to have an amazing evening.

‘Music’s a bit dramatic,’ she says, marching over to the kitchen area. ‘Where are your plates?’

We sit side by side at the breakfast bar, forking curry into our mouths. She’s changed the music, and now we’ve got *Hotel California*.

Hotels! That’s it! That’s what I was going to ask her!

‘Why do you need to be here overnight? Is it for work?’

She looks at me.

‘An appointment.’

The curry is beautiful, but I’m getting full. That’s another thing gin does for you. It becomes your food, your everything. It leaves no room for anything else.

‘Ah. And where is home?’

‘My landlord’s flat’s been repossessed. No one’s moved in yet, and I kept the door key, so that’s where I’ve been sleeping.’

The level in the bottle seems to be sinking fast.

Drinking for two, I think, remembering I am not alone.

‘Can I smoke in here?’ she says, pulling out a packet of Marlboro from her pocket and flipping at a Zippo.

‘Sure,’ I say as she lights up.

Why not? My tenancy forbids it, but who gives a shit, right?

The last supper.

Might as well face it.

‘Are you planning to kill someone?’

‘Kill someone?’ Emma coughs out a lungful of thin, blue smoke. ‘Why would I do that?’

We stare into each other’s eyes. Between the kohl, hers are a clear blue. Bombay Sapphire.

‘Ah! You mean the knife in my bag?’

I nod, still gazing. She holds my eyes a moment more, and then she starts laughing.

‘No, no. That was for me.’

‘Was?’

‘Is. Was. Bloody mix-up. I was planning to die somewhere nice.’

‘Is this nice?’ I ask, scanning the tripe-coloured Artex, the fraying curtains, the sagging floorboards.

‘Hardly. Aren’t you supposed to discourage me? Hit me with the plus points, the things to live for?’

‘Your friend the dog?’

We both double over laughing.

‘Emma Mae. What if I asked you to kill me instead?’

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘Will you? Friday’s a good day for it. The office is closed. No one will miss me.’

‘Dear God, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘Jesus, man, *why*?’

‘This,’ I say, waving an arm at the frond of wallpaper unfurling from the cornice, and then I tip back my head and drain my glass. I feel like I want to cry.

‘How did you find me?’ I say.

‘*You* were supposed to be the odd one,’ I say.

‘You can have my mother’s jewellery,’ I say. ‘I’ve still got some of it left. I’ll make a will and everything.’

When I wake up, I wonder where I am. My eyes find a pattern I struggle to make sense of. Little black specks, like thunder flies. Ah, yes, I am face-planting the fake granite breakfast bar, with a half-empty plate of chicken tikka at one elbow and an entirely empty bottle at the other.

I sit up slowly.

‘Where are you?’ I call, as loud as I can bear. This doesn’t look like the afterlife is supposed to. When I turn my head, I feel like I am going to be sick.

‘Where are you?’

It looks like someone had a fight in here, but that is nothing unusual.

The flat is small, you can see into every corner. No one could hide here. Not even Manet could refract a leering stranger from the morning light. The flat is empty. No coat, no bag, no woman. There’s a kitchen knife on the counter, but one I know is mine. Soon, I must find my phone and check if I’ve texted anyone.

You never know what might happen on a Friday.