

SEVEN SHORT STRANGE STORIES

May 2015/ June 2015

Burglar

Spy

Gambler

Terminal

Menage a trois

Garden Time

Virtues from flaws

BURGLAR

The house is black and empty, it has that sort of empty house feel. A medium sized male figure in predictably dark clothes approaches a window on the side of the house. Taking some kind of tyre lever looking tool he forces one of the supporting windows, there's a sort of muffled crunching bending sort of sound and he quickly looks around just like he's supposed to, and nothing stirs as far as he can tell. He carefully and quietly opens it up and steps into the house, immediately switching on his powerful torch. Treading carefully and without a sense of urgency through the hall he heads upstairs to the bedroom. Flashing the torch on the doors it's easy to see which belong to the children. He strides confidently into the master bedroom and reaches towards a lamp he can see in the half-light, first switching it on and off on the cord, then switching it on at the mains.

The soft orange light is tasteful. He begins looking around and rifles through a draw or two, coming up with some cash in an envelope and a couple of rings, a bracelet but nothing worth very much. He seems kind of relaxed about this whole thing just noiselessly burgling a house and doesn't have the desperate panic of someone inexperienced. He did promise himself no more burglaries a few months ago, after very nearly getting caught when a family turned up at 2am – who *does* that? – he hasn't done that many, just he worries about getting a taste for it and the money is generally handy considering the gambling, his reliance on drugs and some pretty scummy friends left over from a spell of falling in with the wrong crowd. He comes up with some more jewellery at some point but dispatches it back down into the box and he doesn't scowl or anything, he's really calm.

His eyes dart upwards as a strange smell begins to emerge from somewhere behind him, and there's a touch of mild panic as he tries to process exactly what's happening. He mumbles something to himself and walks out of the door, he's not entirely sure what to do nor of what's happening and maybe it's not a big deal. He flashes his torch around for a few seconds, but can see nothing, there's a smoke alarm sort of softly flashing a tiny LED every so often but that's normal isn't it? And he heads back into the bedroom and notices the rapidly growing licks of a *fucking fire* starting in the corner.

He stands there for a split second and processes everything and it looks like maybe when he switched the lamp on he switched on an extension lead and that in turn switched someone's hair straighteners on and they were lying next to a dress on a sort of small sofa and as these thoughts pulse through his head he lurches towards the fire and as he does so he suddenly hears a sort of crackling fizzing sound and he raises his arms for a moment in a primal defence and moves towards the fire and that's when the can of deodorant whistles past the man's head, strikes the ceiling then rebounds at some speed and smacks into the back of his head - the can of anti-perspirant didn't ignite, it exploded just from being so close to the warmth of the tongs and then the heat of the fire. The smoke alarm begins to pulsate with a loud electronic howl.

The sharp but not stultifying pain and the relentless crude scream of the alarm adds to the sense of frenzy and urgency, and he's sort of trampling on the flames but is only barely managing not to set himself on fire

and in the meantime the fire has really taken hold, the sofa thing quickly went up in smoke and spread to some hairsprays and gels it seems; from there it reached the curtains pretty quick and the situation is really not looking good.

In the end in the face of it all there's really only one thing that he can possibly do and he barely hesitates as he takes one last look at the scene about to play out and walks out calmly and walks back down the hall and sighs and shakes his head and climbs out the window into the night and does not look back. He reaches the edge of the small woods and has a look at the cash to see just how much he has taken. He has sixty pounds in an envelope marked 'For kids: Christmas', a twenty euro note and two five pound notes; the jewellery he took looks even cheaper out here. He stands shocked for a second and can't believe he just burned someone's house down for what will likely be less than a hundred pounds.

SPY

He had a database - an actual fucking *database* detailing many aspects of her day to day routine, and via which he kept as complete a record as possible of what exactly she was wearing (colour, brand), what hairstyle she had; what time she left her flat and what time she came back (and the same for the evenings when she had either yoga class, or drinks with friends in the same two bars she always went to). His favourite evening was when she would have dance class because she would wear tight clothes and trainers and would look kind of trashy, though he also liked her dressed smartly, like the clothes she wore for work, for example.

Over the last eight months he had taken around seven thousand mostly long distance photos, saved and sorted in folders by month, then type (face/ body/ special etc), though perhaps five thousand of them were blurry and she was barely recognizable. The other two thousand were taken on a regular consumer camera, by following her round at a distance, and included a set of her in a local park with friends from her home town, shots of her during and after yoga class, her coming and going out of her office at work, standing in line for a coffee for her and her manager, as well as some others from a different high powered telephoto lens (with night vision).

He'd broken this military grade high powered lens a few months ago when he'd run out of battery power and *spare battery power* on a Thursday (yoga) night and in a fit of anger he'd smacked the camera against the table as hard as he could, immediately deeply regretting this. The higher grade lens with the larger light sensor and reduced aliasing had captured some great silhouettes of her figure and particularly of her breasts which he'd already decided, following many hours of comparing them to hundreds of different 'amateur' photos online, were the best he'd seen. There were a few other photos with her nipples just about visible, and some where she just looked cute, and his favourite which had the line of her knickers just visible. A few months ago he'd experimented with Photoshopping some of them, following some online tutorials, but he just wasn't really a creative person and they hadn't looked hot they'd just looked plain weird.

He'd been in her flat just once – he felt he owed it to her to at least make what he saw as the bare minimum effort – and he'd faked a uniform, printed out an official-ish looking letter which she hadn't even checked, and he'd pretended to be reading a meter. He'd grown a beard and was wearing a cap to complete the disguise - not that realistically she would have recognised him, as he barely left his flat and even then really only in the evening. He could work from home, his job on the phone as an IT helpdesk support agent allowed him to work unusual hours.

He'd managed to see around some of her flat and she'd said would he be ok for a minute she was just in the middle of unloading the washing machine and he'd already noted her bedroom as the whole flat was set on the ground floor, it was only a small place and though his heart rate doubled or tripled when she'd said this and he'd mumbled um sure and she said be back in a sec and he'd dashed into the bedroom and torn open the top drawer on the chest of drawers and grabbed the first pair of knickers he could before dashing back out to the kitchen where he began tapping the meter and wrote a number down and he swore she was

already stood there but he couldn't be sure so he'd said ok that's all and had sort of stumbled a little but saved himself falling and then had gotten out of there as quickly as he could the underwear burning a hole in his pocket and that had been a *pretty good* evening. The last three months he'd slept with her underwear under his pillow.

The database had begun to be less manageable once he'd introduced a webcam which captured 12 hours of constant footage of her small bedroom window; he wanted to tag and rate each clip even though in many all you could see was a faint shadow moving. He felt it was worth doing properly. The tags caused the indexing to be slow which was a concern because it slowed the scheduling algorithms which helped to ensure the best possible chance of secretly filming her.

He'd been looking into ways to hack her Facebook account and email address and had researched a number of ways to access her voicemails and other online accounts, and tested them successfully, but he felt that this was in breach of agreed technology-based privacy rules and he had always respected these boundaries.

One afternoon while classifying the latest grainy lo-fi shots of her, he was startled by the arrival of a black crow at the window sill. He found himself strangely disturbed by the crow which had just stared at him then actually fucking *pecked* the window a couple of times so he had pulled the curtains closed and had gone outside because he had to confirm if something was going on and he didn't have the courage to open the window.

When he stepped out into the warm autumn air she was just at the door next to his wearing a black skirt, white shirt, blue kind of cool blazer, brown bag, those low slung sandals he'd watch her buy on Saturday. For a single second his anxiety melted and he found himself saying hi and asking oh did she know his neighbour, Mrs Allen? And she'd said yes, she had bumped into her at yoga class and he pretended not to know about yoga class and she'd brought a book round to lend to her and he feigned interest in yoga though his mind was racing and he was anxious both because he wasn't able to *film this* or record it and because he kept seeing flashes of her naked and then other flashes of her sort of blurry looking... and then to his surprise he asked if she'd like to go for a drink sometime? And she looked a little shocked but laughed and said yeah ok then, though I don't have a great track record on dates recently and he says Thursday? Somehow this makes sense because *he knows* she's busy on Thursdays, so his suggesting this would mean that *she would then know* that he *doesn't know* her schedule. This is not what she is thinking about in any case. He makes a mental note of what she's wearing again and notes the true colour of her eyes – green with flecks of grey - and she says you know what, I normally go to yoga class on Thursdays but I don't know... I have a good feeling about you.

And his heart rate triples for a second he is sailing in a small bright red boat high in the sky and casting a line with a silver hook and he is an all-conquering force of nature, a real man who can *make shit happen* and this proved the few people he knew wrong about so many things and snapping back to reality several seconds later he is filled with an absolute and total horror which he successfully refuses to let show on his face and as he takes her phone number his hand is shaking but he barks at himself to *hold it together* and she thinks he's just nervous and it's pretty cute and says see you then and she floats off and he has no idea what to do next but it strikes him he really should do *something*.

GAMBLER

He had gambled his whole life; as a child betting with himself on which drop of rain on a window would reach the bottom of the window first, what colour the next car would be, then fruit machines, horses, dogs, scratchcards, lottery tickets, pontoon, roulette, poker; football, women's football, those animated 'cartoon' horse races and from time to time fixed odds betting terminals.

He would win then lose, win then lose and win then lose each time; overall of course, he lost. He would occasionally spend an entire week's wages in one afternoon and be left with literally nothing for the week ahead, borrowing or begging the money; he was never a fan of stealing. They called him 'Lucky Lefty' because of the way he would always hold cards in his left hand, or throw dice with his left hand, and hold his drink in his right.

Ten years ago he had accidentally started a family with a girl and he managed to quit all forms of betting for six straight years but when he began again he knew it was unstoppable and that it was here to stay. His family suffered for four years, struggling with payments and covering the mortgage and stalling over bills, with two new children added to the household and amping up the pressure. Four years following his major and irredeemable relapse, drunk, he decides that something has to happen, must change. Even drunk he realises that he had promised this to himself before and look at what had happened as a result.

A friend has once upon a time mentioned an old gun, a relic from an old war, and the gambler convinces him that it would be cool to travel somewhere suitably remote and desolate and shoot it off a few times to see if it works; no point in telling his friend the whole plan. One sunny day they set out nervously in a car to the hills around the town. As they reach the site, they park up and it's all looking good and the gambler seizes the opportunity and takes the gun while his friend is off taking a piss and he closes his eyes and before he can think it through any further he shoots himself in his left hand. He doesn't yell or move or flail or flap and is totally calm, the serenity brought on by the overwhelming and complete belief that finally he's through with gambling. He has destroyed Lucky. The blood is everywhere, but it's more the mise-en-scene as whole - Lucky sat there with a mangled hand and a strange crumpled grin - which truly horrifies the friend who immediately begins driving to hospital, with his face blanched a chalky white.

Later that week the man is recovering in hospital and is visited by his wife and children. The children were told it was a DIY accident, his wife is unclear as to what exactly happened apart from that he did it to himself, and is pleased that he's not dead. The children skip out to take a look around the newborn baby unit with a kind nurse. "It was the right thing to do honey, but it hurts like hell and I miss gambling like fucking crazy".

TERMINAL

Most people called him crazy when they first met him, but after a while they would stop using that term because it was unnecessary: he was so evidently crazy that it didn't need pointing out anymore. He had been a successful fund manager for six years and that was when the diagnosis was given which turned things around. He was a high achiever, balancing an intense and high pressure high stakes work life with a range of exercise, a healthy interest in the arts and cinema in particular, and from time to time charity work. One day he'd gone into the doctor's complaining of a pain in the bridge of his nose. He thought he'd maybe got one of those awkward colds and maybe had worsened it by going swimming in the morning. The doctor took one look and poked a couple of times around his nose, including once with a swab, which had come back bloody, and he had been silent and immediately contacted another doctor in the surgery and she poked around the same and they sort of muttered something in medical terms and they'd suggested a trip to A&E.

Following tests, swabs, examinations, x-rays and other scanning, they told him they were very sorry, but that he had six weeks to live. He had an advanced brain tumour which was pressing up against his skull, a separate nasal cancer, a skin condition and the start of some kind of intestinal meltdown. He felt fine apart from the nasal thing. Two weeks of mild radiotherapy – they note the cancer is too advanced to treat it more aggressively - and two separate teams of specialist doctors tell him he has just two weeks left. He still feels fine – and the nasal soreness is gone – though even the mildest chemotherapy fucks him up.

He decides that if he's going to die in two weeks he may as well give things one last go and that was in retrospect the only bad decision he made.

He booked one of the largest suites in the Dorchester for 10 days. He arranged for bright halogen lights to be placed outside the windows to give the permanent illusion of light – he'd never really liked the night time, it made him uneasy. He started with high class girls and high quality drugs and it quickly sank to low rent girls and taking pretty much anything all the time. The prostitutes come and go all day and all night, sometimes they're putting on shows for him, sometimes two or three or a group of them in a night. He bought a new fast as fuck car and got speeding tickets and while his mobile phone battery lasted, several voicemails from the local police force asking him to pop in as he was proving hard to locate. He's six days and nights into what's basically a depraved drugs binge spiraling really quickly into another world and it's pretty fucking far out and he's missing appointments at the hospital and at some point someone gives him some LSD and he's evidently wandered out of his depth but hey he's going to die in four days so fuck it and he's taking LSD pretty much all the time and it's pretty much way *out there* and he decides that what he really wants to do with the last four days of his life is do everything he can to stay suspended up in the clouds.

The ten days pass and by this time the man is convinced that aliens landed outside the hotel and he knows this because they put on puppet shows for him when no one else is around, and they're fucking cute alien lifeforms but terrible puppeteers, and the shows go on and on and he's not allowed to leave *not even for a minute*. He's been trying to make friends with them because he's worried that the aliens are trying to trick him or at least make a bigger deal of the state of things currently and right now that's the last thing he needs.

He books another four days in the hotel, and carries on being wild; throwing all his money around, and people who have appeared from nowhere begin to steal from him, not even just a little here or there but big amounts, several thousand pounds draining from his bank account daily.

Finally he checks out with a huge cleaning bill and he's back in his flat fucking *wasted* and looking dreadful but at least the aliens are leaving him alone because by the end of the stay the puppet shows had pretty much *taken over* which was a bit fucked and he's glad he seems to have escaped those funny cute fucking aliens for now at least and someone's calling and calling and he's ignoring but eventually at the point where he's about to wrench it from the wall he hesitates and picks up and it's a man from the hospital and he says they need to meet him right away and can he come in to see them? The man from the hospital sounds neither sympathetic nor worried nor anything – just totally *informative*.

He spends 90 minutes trying to get ready to go to the hospital, taking drugs, staring at himself in the mirror, shaving really badly with cuts everywhere – he keeps on seeing those fucking aliens behind him in the mirror but then he turns quickly to catch a sight of them and there's nothing there. He decides he's looking a bit funny these days, and certainly tired. He heads off to the hospital and as he walks along he sees silver aliens walking along and just hanging out on the pavements and dodging out of sight at times and the traffic lights seem to be flashing really quickly from red to amber to green so you barely have time to cross the road and there's a dog that he thinks maybe wanted to lead him someplace and there's an official looking man who he thinks might be following him and four hours later he arrives at the hospital which is a journey should normally take twenty minutes.

Both teams of specialists line up and they all look strikingly similar and the lights are strobing on and off and it's all a bit fucking confusing and the specialists start using language like 'a grave error has occurred' and 'regret over the situation which has developed' and talk of a 'settlement' and the doctors are concerned because he can't seem to focus on the words and someone is suddenly shining a light in his eyes and he can hear someone saying '...it's like he's... just not there' and someone else says 'not exactly a medical description is it though' and all of a sudden he finds himself standing up and he's stretching out his arm and pointing his finger and starting to laugh and it sounds really really fake, kind of feminine and high pitched and keening sound but he won't stop doing it and the team ask him to calm down several times and they try to snap him back into the moment but it becomes clear that that isn't going to happen and they send for a sedative.

MENAGE A TROIS

They're there as a couple but to be fair it's always hard to tell exactly what the deal is, in a cinema, unless the two people are all over each other. The good looking man comes over and sits next to his wife, on her right, though there are plenty of seats left. The husband's already on edge because he and his wife were right in the middle of a long running argument about how hard he works and why isn't he around more not less, and this in fact is partly due to the fact that he's finding it difficult to be faithful, and partly due to being permanently tired, caused by late night sessions jacking off over all kinds of pornography, and not really related to his job at all, and he was doing a just great job of bringing things round so that he could possibly get to screw her tonight until this guy comes in and sits down and glances and nods at both of them.

The good looking well-dressed man looks over and says with a soft growling low european accent, 'glad I made it before it begins - I'm only the *director*' and he grins in such a confident way, all cheekbones with straight white teeth, that there is no way he is telling a joke. The husband's eyes roll a little in the half-dark and he clutches her hand slightly tighter without noticing this and his wife smiles at the man like she means it. 'Oh really?' she asks and the husband's body visibly tenses without the husband noticing this either.

The good looking man stares at the screen which is playing trailers and without being asked begins to outline a story involving a shoot he's just come back from in Italy, where a ton of glamorous italian girls ended a scene with a choreographed routine - he's always loved it when a whole load of people all dance at once, he explains - and how the night dissolved into most of the girls getting topless for a sudden spontaneous idea he'd had for a film, an improvised adult film which he stressed wasn't sleazy but beautiful, and how he'd rushed back home on the producer's private jet to come and see the English subtitled version of his new film which is in Italian, so he could watch it in an actual cinema in London. The good looking man is now undressing her with his dark brown eyes, and she seems to be moving sort of seductively and he's asking her what she does and in the clean light from the screen playing trailers she feels like she's the only girl in the world.

His deep tan and stubble alone makes the husband, all pale and rubbery looking, though with a strong chin, feel less attractive, and the cut of the man's shoulders is so aggressive that the husband noticeably pushes out his chest though he doesn't realise he's doing this. The good looking man is namedropping mentioning his Dad who worked with Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood and he mentions Johnny Depp and Robert De Niro, and then he pauses and picks a piece of lint off her jacket and asks the woman how come she's here watching this film.

She blushes at the attention and relates the story of how her husband mentioned it to her because a review described the film as 'Fellini on acid' to which her husband had said sounds interesting and, guilt ridden because for three weeks he'd been pretty much permanently dreaming of fucking his new secretary, he'd said they should go, insouciantly. The husband was currently deeply regretting those words and making a

mental note to never try to impress his wife by *making an effort*, it was a terrible idea and would only end badly.

The good looking man checks his expensive watch and there's still two minutes until the film starts and the husband is panicking because his wife is currently staring into the good looking man's eyes with a worrying mixture of awe, sex and allure: in short, the way she used to look at her husband. She's flicking her hair and accidentally bumping her arm into him and he swears their thighs are touching and he tries to whisper to his wife about how he'd love to go to her sister's party on Saturday and actually it sounds quite nice but this last faint attempt to get her *attention* goes unnoticed and gets a non-verbal 'hang on' and the husband tightly clutches her spare hand with white knuckles and she sort of shakes it free with a comedy sort of faint sigh, not even aware of why her hand was just gripped so tightly and it's at that point that the lights dim and the husband's heart begins to pound loud and fast.

GARDEN TIME

The camera crew - it's really just two cameras and one sound guy and a runner - have brought a stack of stuff with them and it all looks very professional. The documentary - which is really only a 'talking heads' piece and a short section on garden flowers - is to feature both Lady and Lord Hunt, and the Hunts are in their home - she's highly strung and is nervously micro-arranging flowers and he's gluing a piece of old china back together and sort of muttering occasionally. The three members of the crew are at home doing this kind of a set-piece, it's the sort of location work they do all the time. They're busy setting up the first cameras at the bottom of the stairs for a sepia montage sequence they're putting together and then the second piece will be filmed outdoors with two steadicams. The 'sound' runs off this small generator, says the sound guy to Lord Hunt, so I'll be taking this with us outside.

The sit down 'to-camera' pieces go well and without incident. Lady Hunt talks about how thrilled she is to be finally able to show her prize chrysanthemums on the National Television which is how she keeps referring to the program they're on and the crew keep shooting each other dark glances because they know the ratings are dwindling and the talent left a long time ago in fact the show is close to being cancelled so the footage might never get used and all this is buried in the dark and knowing glances.

Lord Hunt keeps mentioning the size of the estate and how lucky they are to still have working stables and isn't his wife's charity work fantastic and terrific, seems to be saying the things he thinks he should be saying so that his real actual character is aligned with the footage they're going to use. The interviews - just a few lines - wrap up and it's all going fine; they record a 'to camera' piece advertising this section of the show, and they record a lighthearted knowingly-twee cutaway promo scene that the producer wrote and wanted them to say. The sound guy reports that all seems ok with the audio and they tick a few items off a list the producer has with him. At some point the sound guy asks the runner if he can go to buy some extra masking tape because he's used more than he thought he would, and the runner leaves to go to a local shop.

It's as they head to the stairs that it all goes a bit wild. Lady Hunt begins insisting that she gets to do the interviews again and that the crew *guar-an-tee* the jokey faked cutaway is not going to be used in the final broadcast and Lord Hunt begins swearing at her and he's asking when is the voiceover scene going to be recorded, forgetting that they've just recorded it. With the camera still rolling they calm things down and Lady Hunt heads off upstairs, to be filmed coming downstairs.

At the top of the stairs and out of sight, with Lord Hunt quietly muttering to himself, she begins to descend, lightly for a woman her size but as she misjudges a stair near the top of the flight they could all sense things weren't looking good and the camera dedicatedly follows her trajectory as she stumbles twists and falls in glorious slow motion her large body falling and spiraling through the air and she lands really awkwardly with a sort of clumping sound and rolls a little and finally she ends up crumpled next to the generator and more or less at the sound guy's feet and the camera is still rolling and she doesn't make a single sound with her eyes closed and the colour drains from her face and Lord Hunt goes to check on her and he's asking is she ok and

he pronounces upon inspection to everyone that *she doesn't seem ok* and blood is beginning to leak over the wooden floor, probably from the back of her head and Lord Hunt decides he must get right next to his wife so he picks up the generator and the sound guy moves backwards and they're still recording everything and somehow the generator which was safety checked just 12 days earlier delivers a huge electric shock and there's a horrible singed smell and a flame appears from nowhere for a split second and there's a loud sort of rushing sound and the sound guy jumps back and grabs the headphones from his head because a second ago they were screaming with a feedback noise and Lord Hunt is still in a sort of bent over position like a sort of statue and everyone is gripped by this scene and a couple of seconds pass before he stops standing up and topples and collapses rigidly alongside his wife.

A moment. One of the crew exhales 'holy fucking jesus'. They put down their cameras from their shoulders and the sound guy lets the boom fall a little, and they all stand really still and no-one says anything for a few minutes and the generator occasionally makes sparking and phutting noises and they all just try to process the situation and no-one wants to make things any worse than they already are. The lock on the door turns and the runner suddenly appears at the front door, steps into the silence: 'I got the masking tape'.

VIRTUES FROM FLAWS

ACT ONE FEBRUARY COLD

It seemed to be cold all the time and it seemed it had been like that for a long time. Frost settled and stayed in the shadows, the walls of houses were cold. In the kitchen it was warm and Connie was busily cooking and watching an early evening chat-show on the television. The people on the TV were talking about how great their lives were and how excited they were about some project which was coming up, the usual sort of banality. The blue glow of the set contrasted with the warm orange of the kitchen, Connie finds this particular time of day to be calming and she likes the way things look and she likes hearing about the terrific and glamorous lives of the people on the show.

An hour later and the show is over and it's moved onto the news, which is as depressing as ever. Connie checks her watch again, and checks her phone to see if there's a message or a missed call which has made its way through without alerting her. There are no messages and she returns the phone to the table and sighs.

Sean pushes his keys into the door and takes a deep breath, telling himself to feel sober and rehearsing the lines he's prepared in his head for this situation. The situation is not something new. Recently things have been getting worse and it's all he and Connie can do to try to construct some kind of workable narrative around this, some illusion of things being ok, some kind of surface which allows them to exist. Sean pushes the door open slowly and something about the way the hall looks reminds him of a recent row and he is immediately recalling the way things had panned out that time. Things hadn't been the same since and he'd done all he could to not deal with it, instead taking more coke and staying out more as well as fucking a couple of prostitutes. Connie had been scared but the worst thing was that Sean had found himself enjoying this sensation. It had shocked him but he had known that it wasn't the kind of thing you could do anything about. He had called to mind the trite cliché 'just be yourself' and had grimaced at the time.

Sean cruised into the kitchen and hung his coat over the back of one of the chairs. He walked over and kissed Connie on the mouth briefly. He did his best to look casual.

"Sorry I'm late, something came up."

"Oh that's fine, but I did wonder if you'd had an *accident*, you know how I worry."

Far from having an accident, Sean had been round to see his drug dealer. Not only that but at lunch he had taken a female colleague out and had convinced her that they should go out together, tomorrow evening; she'd been playing with her hair and accidentally brushed into him a couple of times. The best thing about it was that she already knew he was married so that would mean slightly fewer lies and secrets though nevertheless it was always a bit nerve-wracking. There was always a chance the other woman would flip out and try to do some damage. It had happened once but Sean had dealt with it pretty effectively. He hadn't fucked *that many* women in the five years he and Connie had been together and he told himself one is as bad

as ten, then used this sentiment to allow himself to carry on with this type of behaviour. They weren't married but Connie was convinced that as soon as she felt less depressed or overwhelmed or upset that they would be.

"...is dinner... ok?"

"Well it's a bit dry but I think we can still have it."

Connie began plating the meal up.

Sean's face didn't change but he shrugged and a small but tangible feeling began to grow inside of him and he didn't suppress it. He shoots a glance through the open kitchen door to the hall and recalls how things had escalated and how this same feeling had grown tentacle like until it had pulsed and clutched at his neck and he had *become* the feeling. She had been following him about the house, asking him questions and crying and asking more questions and he'd got sick of it. The claustrophobia had followed him. He'd contemplated going and doing some coke and just leaving her there but they'd agreed that he wasn't going to do drugs anymore. He'd noticed that when he swore heavily she would almost physically wince, and when he shouted she would look meek. But the pleading and soft whimpering 'but I love you I love you' would carry on. Sean had contemplated whether it was this which had finally pushed him over the edge; "help me oh please help me" she'd begun repeating. She had flinched a couple of times before he'd actually hit her and she'd been fucking quiet then.

Connie put the dinner on the table and Sean looked at it.

"This looks... awful,"

"Oh I'm sorry, I mean, I didn't know when you would be home,"

"I've just been busy, I had a lot on at work," Sean sighed.

"Oh I know what you..."

"HOW WOULD YOU FUCKING KNOW?"

Sean picked up the plate and in a moment of black comedy simply walked to the bin and slowly slid the food off the plate, then dropped the plate into it.

"Oh I'm sorry, I didn't mean I..."

"No, you never do, do you?" replied Sean, real calm.

The scene in his mind continues playing and her shock at the time was pretty palpable and all Sean had been left with was cliches about how sorry he was and how a red mist came down and it wasn't her fault and he would *seek help*. At the time he'd wished he hadn't mentioned how it wasn't her fault, because she had begun this sentiment like a catchphrase – not sardonically but literally – 'it's all my fault... I've driven you to this... please, help me; it's my fault'. Connie's medication didn't help her, she would think foggily pretty much all the time, and the only time her libido really kicked in was around her period when her instincts for children led to some sort of sex drive emerging from the haze of her existence. Something in the situation

resonated with them both and her sense of things being out of her control would ring alarm bells and sometimes these were good alarm bells and sometimes bad.

Silence. The TV said 'This weekend's hot air balloon show will be a real visual treat for all the family.'

"I'll try and be a better cook... I can learn," and she looked at him for re-assurance.

"I bumped into Ruth on the way from the train station. She really *does not* like you anymore, does she? I mean, I tried to stick up for you, I said you were just going through a bit of an odd phase and you'd snap out of it sooner or later but she said she'd heard some rumours and that you probably shouldn't text or call her again."

Connie processed this and looked upset but then crossed her hands in front of her

"Well... Ruth is a fine judge of character and I hope that one day she'll believe me ...I miss seeing her children though,'

"Do you think she cares as much about you as you say you do about her?" And Sean sort of snorts animal-like. He paced around the kitchen a little, paying attention to the developing and emerging tension, and decided to ratchet it up.

"Why is this kitchen such a mess? What do you even *do* all day? I hate seeing this kind of fucking mess everywhere, you know I hate it."

More silence. Connie tries to ignore the hostility.

"Why don't we do something nice, maybe I can do something nice for you; maybe this weekend; we don't have any plans do we?"

Sean ignored her, preferring to gaze at an advert for a razor specially designed for women. "...for an ultra-smooth finish,"

"... you see, we've been invited for dinner, at the Atkins – across the street... her husband – you know Tom – he's off to the US for six weeks, and Beatrice mentioned it might be nice, just us and them."

Beatrice feels sorry for Connie; Connie reminds her of a childhood friend who would regularly be found walking in the fields around the school. She would just walk out of the school and head for the countryside. However sympathetic Beatrice is, she still let Sean fuck her after a barbeque at their place last summer. The extra twist of irony is that while Connie has no idea about this incident, Beatrice has told her husband everything and he made her record her descriptions to mp3. Tom plays this and jacks off, while Beatrice gets to sleep with an occasional stranger from the internet.

Sean looks up, recalling the incident at the Atkins and grinning a little. Connie was immediately confused by the smile but misread it as a change in mood.

"So, I'll tell her yes, shall I?"

'Yeah ok.'

“..and more and more marriages fail as a result of extra-marital affairs,” the tv says.

Connie and Sean both register this and Connie looks at him and grimaces lightheartedly and in a comic tone says,

“You should know, I’m cheating on you, Sean,”

Sean looked up and for a split second is suspicious and through his paranoia she looked half serious but this instinct falls instantly away and is replaced with confidence. He raised the stakes to see what would happen.

“Well I’m cheating on you too.”

The blood drained out of Connie’s face.

“Oh, I’m only joking!” she said. Sean looked away.

“Well I’m not.”

And he laughed.

ACT TWO AUGUST HOT

The heat was bright and feverish and didn't help. Connie waited for Sean to come back from a night class in Creative Writing which he had started to attend. Connie had been surprised but Sean had reassured her that it was something he'd wanted to do for a while and he thought it would help him "appreciate what he had". He'd spoken calmly and besides, since he'd started, things had seemed more stable and he had seemed happier with her. Sean hadn't been going to night class, but Connie didn't suspect a thing. He had printed short stories off the internet to convince her, adding his name to the top. She'd been a little surprised the time he'd written about two grandparents and their love of lakes and how much they loved each other, but she'd told herself it was after all a *creative* writing course.

Sean's a little late but he had earlier sent her a message explaining why - sometimes the class goes for a drink after finishing. She's watching TV, a cheap straight-to-dvd film about a woman who campaigns against animal cruelty and how she becomes a lawyer or something so she can win the case. Connie doesn't usually feel in the mood to do anything these days, listlessly reading magazines or showering or moisturising or cleaning the house, vacuuming, watching tv. She was a teacher at a primary school for a while but following her breakdown in the middle of an assembly, for reasons neither she nor her psychiatrist understood, she's been on sick leave, with stress. She had asked Sean if she could help out at a local after school group, just reading with the children once or twice a week but Sean had insisted the pressure would be too much, telling her a couple of horror stories straight from the tabloids.

"...your honour, I insist this case be dropped" says the TV, as Connie hears the lock turn and sits up straighter without realising it. Sean comes in and he's red faced and he kissed Connie.

"How was class?"

"Fine, yeah."

Sean's class tonight consisted of heading to a local strip club, doing some coke in the toilets there and then spending some time with Carmen, a dancer who, for punters she likes, offers blowjobs for £35. He drove around for a while after that, did a bit more coke, took one of his wife's Xanax to settle him down and pulled up outside the house where he'd sat for five minutes enjoying the stillness and rehearsing his next move.

"Do you want something to eat?"

Sean was aware he was hungry but was reluctant to accept anything from her.

"I already ate; maybe a coffee?"

She curls her legs up underneath her. Her dressing gown is still damp from the recent shower she took. The curves of her body remind Sean of a time they'd spent in a hotel, for two days, and he recalled the sound of his thighs banging into the back of hers and how she looked up sort of oddly pleadingly at him while he fucked her.

"The Atkins haven't got back to me, about the invite," she said.

Connie has been trying to plan an evening dinner with the Atkins. They had blown out a recent engagement at the last minute and ever since Connie hadn't had a reply to her calls and if she ever brought it up with Beatrice, Beatrice would quickly make up an excuse, and quickly close down the conversation and have to leave. Connie thought that the reason for this was down to Sean. The last time, Sean had begun mildly belittling Tom, Beatrice's husband. Connie had thought it very awkward. Connie didn't realise that Tom liked being belittled and his wife liked it too; Tom got off on being weak and Beatrice liked the smug mix of having cake and eating it too. Sean didn't realise any of this either, but generally enjoyed belittling people as it made him feel better about himself, reinforcing his self-image.

"Enjoy great fruit smoothies wherever you are with our new picnic pack," says the TV.

"...it's because you wouldn't stop going on about Tom's outdated car, and Tom's suits and Tom's favourite *band*... we've been through this so many times Sean."

"It's funny you should say that. I bumped into Beatrice and she told me she's been ignoring you and she says it's because you're a bit of a cunt."

Connie blanched a little as Sean continued,

"She said you seem to think you're better than everyone and that last time, while she was telling you a story about her mum, you burst into laughter, and she said one of her kids felt 'uneasy' around you, and she also mentioned something about you making an inappropriate comment about the situation in North Korea."

Connie was speechless, trying to establish what she thought of this.

Sean recalled how he'd opened the curtains of the hotel they were staying in and she could see her reflection in the huge windows in the room, could see her nakedness, high above the city and he'd come up with some pretty high octane shit and she'd complained about it but had wanted to please him and had gone along with it in the end.

"She said she thought you seemed cold, and she said that was why you've got no friends,"

Connie's eyes welled up.

"I told her, woah – that's way out of line – that's just not true, well, not most of it anyway."

Sean has been fucking Beatrice pretty regularly, the set up works pretty well. The only minor problem was that Beatrice had asked if she could film them together and Sean didn't like the idea of this. On one occasion Sean found a camera blinking away on the dresser at Beatrice's, partially hidden by a make-up bag. He'd stopped and calmly wandered over to the camera and smashed it as hard as he could against the wall first, before picking it up and launching it at the corner of the room. It hadn't smashed fully the first time so he picked it up again and repeated throwing it as hard as he could. It smashed eventually, and although Beatrice was a little freaked out he walked back over to the bed and carried on fucking her and it had in the end been a pretty memorable occasion. On the way to the bathroom he had stepped on a chip of the broken plastic and cut his foot a little. He'd told Connie this was from the gym, and she'd believed him, and bought a pair of flip-flops for him to use there. Beatrice meanwhile decided it would be best not to try to film anymore but was pretty excited at the outburst and her husband Tom was pretty excited too.

“Why do people have to be so mean, Sean?”

Sean moves over towards her and moves to comfort her a little, gently rubbing her arm,

“People get spiteful, get jealous, get mean. Who knows. She seemed like a bit of a cunt herself, they both do.”

Sean began thinking about Beatrice’s foot in his crotch under table at the last dinner and he made a mental note to get in touch with her and organise something soon. Connie regained some sort of composure. She took a deep breath.

“Sean, here, do you want to check my phone?”

“No, not really”. Sean realises this has not come out of the blue and is prepared for what comes next, he’s seen it all before.

And so before she says “Sean, are you cheating on me?” he pulls out his phone and hands it towards her.

“Sean, are you cheating on me?” she says anyway.

“No, of course not. When would I have time? With the night class and my job and the gym, when would I ever have time? Besides, we *live* together”.

Although mildly aggravated by the question, Sean is pretty well practiced at lying and he challenges himself to tell as few as possible. This doesn’t restrict his behaviour, he just has to find more and more deceitful ways of framing his decisions. And it turned out he was pretty good at this.

Besides, Sean makes sure his phone is clean of anything incriminating. He’s memorised the numbers of two drug dealers and keeps scraps of paper in a sort of hidden compartment in his wallet for anything else. She never asks to check his wallet.

Connie quickly flicks through the messages but has done this before and found nothing. She looks up and one of Sean’s eyes is sort of twitching in a way it only ever did when he’d done drugs. Connie didn’t like illegal drugs, much as she would happily take medicine prescribed by her doctor. Sean did like illegal drugs but they’d agreed he wasn’t going to do any more after Sean had disappeared without trace for three days a couple of years ago, and had come back and asked her to forgive him - he’d been with his brother, up north, who at the time had thought he was on the verge of a divorce with his wife, and Sean had had to stick around drinking and taking drugs with him, and they’d gotten carried away and his phone had run out of battery power and he was sorry about all the trouble and the fact that she’d gone to report a missing person to the Police.

“...have to find some way to prove it is all... I think I know exactly what to do,” says the TV.

“Are you doing drugs again?”

Sean blushes very slightly but not noticeably.

“No, no, of course not – we agreed.”

Sean is doing drugs more than at any point in their marriage, and he's also drinking relatively heavily – spirits mainly this time, which almost always makes Sean moodier for no good reason.

Connie is caught up in this line of questioning and can do nothing to stop herself.

“What happened to the savings account? We had a statement today...”

“It's nothing – I moved some of it to an investment vehicle is all, you don't need to worry about it.”

“What kind of a... vehicle?”

“Listed Derivatives mainly, this friend of mine is a broker for a huge hedge fund and he does a little of his own... investing.”

Sean has been spending the savings mainly on drugs and strippers but has also been investing with his friend, and things have not been going well. Carmen, the blow job giving stripper has taken to offering more, and it's been getting a little expensive, with Sean visiting her twice a week, in the place of going to the mythical Creative Writing class and the gym.

“Stop being paranoid, you know I can't stand it when you're paranoid... come on honey,”

Connie looked upset. Sean shrugged but can sense things are getting out of control and must be brought back into check. Connie unwittingly offers an opportunity.

“I think I might have ummm... accidentally spilt some coffee on a report you left out... one for work, I think,”

Sean pauses for a split second.

“What? WHERE IS IT?”

Connie pulled the report out from under a magazine. There is a really light small coffee stain on one corner.

“I'm sorry Sean, I know...”

“You clumsy fucking idiot...”

“I know, I know, and I'm so sorry,”

Sean knows that all he has to do is to select 'print' on his laptop and the colour printer situated conveniently next to his desk will print and the report will be replicated entirely. In fact, he has to reprint it anyway to amend a graph. But he decides not to let this become apparent.

“Do you do this sort of thing ON PURPOSE?”

Sean raised his voice considerably to drum home the phrase and to spike the tension rapidly.

“I'm so sorry, it's my fault, I was cleaning and I didn't notice the coffee pot and it's such a small stain but it's definitely ruiiiii-nnnne—ddd!”

The last word is mangled into a sort of howling sound.

“Please, forgive me, it won’t happen again I swear it, I swear it.”

Connie’s hands are pressed together as though in prayer. The old fashioned word ‘beseech’ flickers through Sean’s head but he almost enjoys it when things fall into this pattern. Connie is convinced that Sean is her salvation, that through Sean she can get to what it is she wants and that if only she can be better, think clearer, give more, then everything will be ok.

ACT THREE OCTOBER LATE

The wind picks up from time to time blowing leaves long dead around the streets and gardens. The mood is one of change, in line with the seasons. It's a Sunday and Connie spent the morning at her mother's house. They don't talk about anything serious, so nothing serious ever comes up. Connie's mother is the sort of mother who is a little wrapped up in her own world. She keeps her two children at arm's length, having had a string of semi-serious boyfriends since their father passed away. In direct response to this, one of the children emigrated to the other side of the world, so that it wasn't an issue: the small amounts of time together there was enough to talk about just catching up with news. Connie lived an hour away and although she mostly went along with her mother's desire to just let her get on with her own life, occasionally, feeling brave, she would call up and head over to spend brunch with her.

Sean never liked Connie's mother. He wasn't sure if it was because she read him very well for the cunt he was, seeing through any sort of representation of himself to recognise the strange and calculating character beyond; or whether it was because he didn't like her because of the way she treated Connie. While pretty much amoral, and deceiving Connie practically hourly, Sean still thought it was unfair that her mother was so fucking useless.

Connie arrives back home in the early afternoon and Sean is listening to music. His Dad had a thing for country and western and Sean sometimes listens to it to remind him of his Dad.

"...my hair is still curly and my eyes are still blue, why don't you love me like you used to do?" sings the Hi-fi jauntily.

Connie comes in and kisses Sean and puts her bag down.

"How was your Mum?"

"Fine, yeah; same old."

Sean thought of the first time he had met her mother. Connie had been worrying about it the whole week, and Sean was determined to make a good impression, if only to spite the mother, who had apparently been saying some worryingly accurate things about the type of person he was. On the journey home, Sean and Connie had shared a tender hour cruising back to their house while they'd both enjoyed criticising her mother, and he'd made her feel better about everything for a short time. It had felt like they were together and not separate and Sean had panicked because this was new. He needn't have worried because almost as soon as they had got out of the car the old routines began, Connie accusing him, Connie crying, Connie uncertain, Connie wants this, Connie wants that.

"That's nice."

"Sean, why is Beatrice's cardigan here?"

"What?"

"This is Beatrice's cardigan."

"What is?"

Sean figured it best to neglect to mention that an hour ago he'd been busily fucking Beatrice on this very sofa. Beatrice had neglected to mention that her husband would be watching them through binoculars. She guessed correctly that Sean wouldn't want to know this.

"...if you loved me half as much as I love you..." wailed the Hi-fi.

"Why is Beatrice's cardigan here?"

Sean further neglects to mention that he planned for her to leave it there. He had spotted that Beatrice had left it and had sort of hidden it when she had gone back to her house, and he had left it out on purpose. More to the point he's packed the stuff he really wants to keep in a couple of suitcases upstairs. He's pretty much high as a kite also, following a morning spent doing coke before Beatrice got here, then he smoked a couple of joints with her and she'd split one of her anti-depressants with him when she left.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I think it might be from when she was round here earlier this morning and I was fucking her brains out; twice in fact."

"What?"

Connie looks uncertain about what is happening, but can sense that something is definitely happening. Sean pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket.

"And just in case you ever need it, here's the number of a pretty hot stripper who'll fuck you for £95, which incidentally is where a lot of the savings has gone, that and on feeding my drug habit. More bad news: the rest has been "invested" down to pretty much nothing."

Connie is shocked and says nothing but her eyes fill up with tears.

"Oh Sean I've driven you to this haven't I! Oh please tell me what I can do better, please help me. It's all my fault isn't it...?"

"I don't know."

A pause.

"I know it sounds weak, but I love you."

"You're right, it does sound weak."

Sean got up and walked up the stairs and Connie stood dead still and the silence is deafening and she hears the footsteps go up the stairs and hears something being picked up and then footsteps coming down the stairs and she hears the front door open and watches Sean as he puts the cases in his car calmly and then she hears the ignition and watches the car driving away.