

Patricia

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1.

I closed the front door behind me. Exactly as I always do, with a sharp little tug to make sure. I walked down the path at a measured pace and unlocked the car from the usual distance. If the neighbours' son was in his room across the street, nothing would strike him as odd. Everything sounded as it otherwise sounded. I started the car, fastened my seat belt and drove off.

It was a late afternoon, white clouds against a blue sky. The long street curved gently past the suburban villas, at the crossroads the traffic lights were green. I changed gear and accelerated, the road ahead was clear. It was as if the lights had waited, stayed green that little bit longer, held the gate open for me. They had seen what had happened and they were on my side.

I dared not look at the houses, avoided the gaze of people on the pavement. I kept to the speed limit, keen not to be caught on camera. Two junctions gave me right of way, then a red light loomed. My chest tightened at the thought of having to stop, but as the lights came closer I spotted a green arrow pointing left. I heard the tick of my indicator and the car eased round the bend as if of its own accord, though I knew the neighbourhood I was entering. A part of town shunned by everyone in our circle of friends, close by and yet practically another country.

The streets narrowed, grew busier. What I saw chimed with the image that occurred to me when David, at the end of another dinner party, poured the brandy and the men settled back in their chairs to bemoan a city that was going to the dogs. The shops with their clutter spilling onto the pavement. The decaying frontage of the nineteenth-century houses, rusted balustrades, rotting doors. The grime. The pent-up aggression. All I had to do was keep driving and I would wind up somewhere else; this neighbourhood did not go on forever. What came next? I pictured the map of the city, homed in on its western fringes. The motorways, they came next, the abandoned district dwarfed by viaducts, where not so long ago I had organised an event in an empty furniture store. There or thereabouts I could find my way onto the ring road, then take the motorway heading west. Alone in my car, I nodded. Hit the motorway and there would be nothing to hold me back.

I swiftly negotiated the obstacles in my path – dawdling figures dressed in robes, vans with back doors flung wide, cars double-parked. Half a mile on I recognised the broad sweep of the furniture store's windows, displaying nothing, merely reflecting. I recalled the canapés the hostess had selected for the reception, seven types in all, the espuma of smoked trout had been a resounding success. I turned onto a slip road. The commuters leaving town at the end of the working day were in a hurry, seemed jittery, braked late, but by some miracle the traffic continued

to flow. At the first sign for a service station on the westbound lane I relaxed. I felt my weight sink into the seat and I breathed deeply in and out. A second sign came and went. I've gone mad, I thought. I slowed down, took the next exit and came to a halt by the roadside, behind a truck with a Bulgarian number plate. I was exhausted. As if I had run all the way to this place.

I stared at the colourful tarpaulin stretched across the back of the trailer. A young woman smiled down at me, barely twenty, braless in a snow-white top. A basket of carrots, leeks and tomatoes hung from her arm, in her other hand she held a cucumber. David detested cucumber. An aversion he stated every chance he got. It seemed to be a point of pride with him. His voice in my head. I am a man who eats everything. There is nothing I won't eat. Except cucumber. Whenever I eat cucumber, I become ill. And he would smile and give an exaggerated shrug, at a loss to explain this phenomenon to his dumbstruck dinner guests.

Perhaps he thought no one would expect such a quirk from a man so rational. Perhaps he hoped people would think him a touch eccentric.

I got out of the car and walked over to the grass and the trees, away from the rush of the motorway. I stood at the furthest picnic table. The earth around the benches was bare and cracked. Behind a barbed wire fence, the giant shadows of a wind turbine slashed across a field. I followed the rotation of a blade, tried to gauge the speed of the point, its impact on a human head.

I turned back towards the petrol station. Two truckers in stained vests were standing by a trailer, smoking. The tarp was stripped back, there was a large puddle of water at their feet. I could smoke a cigarette here, buy a pack at the shop. I still had time for a smoke, perhaps that's what I should do. A symbolic act. Louis loved bath time, he would not notice my disappearance right away. I saw him blowing holes in the foam, playing with the plastic that he was gradually growing out of – a watering can, a turtle. Or lying back, ears just below the surface, listening to that other world as he fiddled with his little willy. For Louis, my absence from the bathroom was simply explained: I had gone downstairs to my computer. If Mummy was not in the bathroom, she was downstairs working. As always. And when he shouted 'Mummy' she would come.

I've gone mad, I whispered.

It took another few seconds, then panic seized me. For two seconds, three, I stood there motionless by the picnic table, a step beyond the border of my life, looking in.

I ran to the car. I had to get back as quickly as I could.

Three miles I drove, further west, and still the exit would not come. It was impossible not to think of Louis, a boy of five alone in that house, of everything that could go wrong. Electricity. Wet feet on stone steps. His fascination for our Japanese knives, strictly off limits. He could walk out the door and vanish.

Traffic was backed up at the exit. I gave myself a stern talking to, there was no use crying. When I had crossed the bridge and rejoined the motorway at last, I felt better. I put my foot down and chased the other cars from the outside lane. Everything would be all right. I was nearing the city, I saw the tops of the first high-rise blocks, glanced at the dashboard clock. The bathwater would be cold by now. Louis had already called out to me. He was calling me, I could hear him. The boy standing naked at the top of the stairs, bathwater dripping on the floor. Fetch a towel, I thought, willing him to obey. Stay where you are.

If I'd had my phone, I could have called someone. But Christ, how was I supposed to explain this, who could I have turned to? I do not know. And so I drove, faster. I switched off the radio and concentrated on the cars in front of me, on the slightest change that hinted at a manoeuvre. I took everything in, even the blind walls and forklift trucks that slipped sidelong through my field of vision. The houses that lined a parallel street. The slabs of worn concrete around a football pitch. I thought of my dead phone in the bathroom and swore out loud.

I thought of Mr Dierickx from the bank, a tall man with cold hands. The way he said Astrid, as if he owned me. With some clients you knew from the start: this going to be an assault course. Either they had an incurable lack of trust or too much time on their hands. Despite watertight

arrangements made at countless meetings and tastings, they continued to meddle in the preparations for the coming festivities. Morning, noon and night they called, every thought that plopped to the surface had them reaching for the phone. As a rule, I had the patience to hear them out, though I could have answered them in seconds and cut the conversation stone dead.

My employers, an ambitious bunch of friends who called themselves The Boys, hailed me as a diplomat, a dove of peace. They saw my patience as extraordinary. Whenever it was called for, I was brought in to be the friendly face of the company. Not only was I able to shelve my emotions with clients and personnel alike, but I also outdid other event managers when it came to solving the problems that inevitably arise just as the celebrations are about to get underway. When stress levels soar, they maintained, Astrid keeps her cool, maintains her focus.

At times I believed what they said about me.

David, too, never missed a chance to praise my patience and my commitment. Now and again he would buy me an item of jewellery, usually something with a pearl, oblivious to the fact that his words made me feel like an employee. His latest gift had been an expensive notebook and a travel fountain pen, designed to mark the 100th birthday of an American writer, an Astrid; even her surname, I seem to recall, began with an H, like mine. David was not one for domestic staff. He had trouble trusting strangers in his own home, with his own son. He simply couldn't, he said. Sorry. Only Simonne, the little old woman who had cleaned his mother's house since before he was born, was allowed in one morning a week to 'freshen up the place'. This left the rest of the housekeeping to me, a consequence that went unspoken.

At last I reached the point where the motorway met the ring road, and swerved abruptly into the exit lane. Almost home.

Mr Dierickx would have called one of the boys by now. I had spoken to him on the phone less than an hour before and could still hear the resentment in his voice, as if a reproachful cluck was the only sound that scrawny gullet of his could produce. I listened, tried to calm him, and promised to call the city chambers immediately, the venue where, in four hours' time, the celebrations to mark the bank's jubilee were due to kick off. For days on end he had spoken emphatically about the jubilee, never once called it a party, and each time the word was said with a blend of insult and indoctrination, lest I forget that this was not one of my piddling everyday assignments. I continued to listen politely to Mr Dierickx's litany, the term 'breach of contract' passed his lips, a claim for damages was hinted at. He had called just as I was picking up Louis from his after-school playgroup. I talked and explained and hunted for my son's shoes in the muddled heap by the coat stand. At home I ran a bath for Louis and, sitting on his little plastic step, I soothed Mr Dierickx, that heartless man, cold as a reptile, and Louis was wild as ever after his hour at the playgroup. As I was talking, a second call came in. I saw that it was Johan, our long-serving logistics guy who nevertheless insisted on calling me with the least little problem. It was no doubt concerning the tables for the reception, tables Mr Dierickx was insisting had failed to materialise. I picked up quickly, explained I was on the other line, asked him to wait two minutes, heard the beginnings of a protest and switched straight back to Mr Dierickx. Louis climbed into the bath, kicked at the foam but his foot caught the water. Wet flecks splattered and slid down the window. And when he sat down, he rocked from side to side and his body sent water sloshing over the edge and onto the floor. In a reflex, my hand shot towards his head and only at the last moment was I able to soften the blow to a smack. I swore, loudly, directly into the phone. Louis was startled, had never heard me swear before, had never been smacked before and, quickly recognising I was startled too, he took his crying to another level, louder, accusatory. I asked for a moment, Mr Dierickx fulminating as I put down the phone and pulled a towel from the rail to throw over the sopping parquet, while my son's cries became a kind of shouting. The towel brushed against my phone on the surround of the bath. It seemed as if I could still intervene. For one moment, there seemed to be time to stop the phone falling into the water. But there wasn't.

The foam obscured my view, my arm plunged up to the elbow in bathwater. It took too long. I fished the phone out just in time to see the words Mr Dierickx snuffed from the screen. An instant of grey, then sudden black. Louis stopped crying, flopped onto his front and gazed at his reflection in the curve of the tap. My phone was dead. I wondered how all this must have sounded to Mr Dierickx, pictured bathwater dribbling out of his phone at the other end of the line, saw the horror on his face.

I put down the phone and looked out at the magnolia by the window. Two black birds were chasing each other, flitting from branch to branch. It dawned on me that I was no longer contactable. Mr Dierickx, his jubilee, Johan and the reception tables, the boys in their big Audis, the clients clamouring for their estimates, David at his law firm. I had, in a sense, vanished from the face of the earth. I felt calm and watched the black birds for a while until eventually, one by one, they flew away. Then I went downstairs and left the house.

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2.

His car was parked outside, the Range Rover. I saw it from a distance, the unmistakeable hulking silhouette in front of the garage. David was never home at this time. He was never home before seven thirty. I checked the dashboard clock. I had been gone for fifty minutes.

I drove past my house as if it were any other house in the street, a street I did not know. A car with a woman of thirty-nine at the wheel, on her way somewhere. No glance to the side as I passed number 50. The feeling in my legs and stomach was like standing at the edge of an abyss.

Somewhere near the station I stopped at a supermarket car park. After a minute or two, I turned off the engine and listened to the quiet. I remembered nothing about how I got there, all I could see was the Range Rover. There had been no commotion, no alarm had been raised. All was calm. Louis was safe. But what if I had arrived too soon and David had only just come home? Perhaps he had made his macabre discovery as I was driving past. Perhaps the banal sound of my car out in the street, a faint hiss building slowly and fading swiftly, was the first sound to reach David in the powerless silence after finding our dead child.

I backed up too far, hit a low brick wall, the collision jolted me forwards. Leaving the car park, I followed the signs for the inner ring road, a maddening one-way circuit of short streets through a residential area. Whose bright idea was this? At the exit to the maze, I spotted a direct route through the city, there was no need to stick to the ring road. The lights were against me now. Intent on keeping me from my fate.

Slowly I drove down a side street to the point where, beneath the low-hanging branches of an old spruce on the corner, I could see my own house, a hundred yards or so up ahead. No ambulance, only the Range Rover. Everything about the house seemed normal. I had never seen it this way before. A modernist building with almost every window concealed behind its back. How could I ever know what was happening inside?

The tension in my body eased, but I remained alert. Some instinct would not let me conclude that all was well with Louis. To give in to that thought would be to hear the siren of an ambulance speeding this way. I blotted out an image of Louis being stretchered out of the house.

I waited, watched. Who knew what David had found? Perhaps what he saw was a crime scene, and his first thought was that I had killed our son, then run away. That my phone had fallen into the bath as I held the boy underwater. Perhaps he thought that I had sat there racked with doubt,

wanting to call someone, the emergency services, the police. But seeing that my phone had given up the ghost, I had fled.

The low sunlight angled in through the car window, warm on my shoulder. In the rearview mirror, I saw a man walking his dog, ambling in my direction. An elderly man, cap, trimmed white beard. No one I knew. He walked with his hands behind his back, eyes fixed on the ground at his feet. When I looked again, man and dog had disappeared into one of the houses.

No police arrived, no ambulance. I wondered if the family doctor might put in an appearance. But when fifteen minutes had passed it seemed highly likely that David had come home to find Louis sitting in the bath. When Louis became absorbed in a game, the world around him fell away and he felt no cold, no thirst, no hunger. David had climbed the stairs and asked where I was and the boy had looked up in surprise and answered that Mummy was downstairs working at her computer. David had searched the house from top to bottom. Even the cellar, a room in which he never set foot. Returning to the bathroom, he had found my phone and immediately called the Boys, then a few of my friends – Sarah, Helena, Niki. What would he be doing now, I thought, now he knew that I had disappeared? What would I do?

While I felt sorry for David, I could not simply reappear. I needed time to think, but the longer I waited, the worse things became. I was anxious, David would demand an explanation. He would stand there in the hall, arms crossed, and raise his voice. If I stood by the door and did not answer, he would walk up and grab me by the shoulders, firmly, as if to shake an answer out of me. Then he would let go, bring his face close to mine and quietly, perhaps menacingly, say that he had a right to an explanation.

Where could I begin?

I thought back to the bathroom, saw my phone at the edge of the bathtub. It wasn't that I had waited to see whether it would fall, heads or tails – I knew what was coming, saw it with perfect clarity, as if it had already happened. And then it did happen, happened again as it were, and the phone disappeared underwater, its smooth splash clearly audible amid Louis's bawling. I had not made the least attempt to prevent the fall and my surprise at this had lasted a few seconds, long enough, before my arm plunged into the foam.

I wrenched my stare from the bonnet of the car and looked again at our house, then up and down the street. It struck me how quiet it was here. Barely a soul to be seen, despite the wide pavements, the trees and the glorious late afternoon. The sun cast a gentle light over the roofs.

It occurred to me that we never went for walks any more. When Louis had been little we would seize every opportunity to pull on our hiking boots and take off in the direction of the nature reserve half a mile from our front door. I noticed I was smiling as I thought of David, the loving looks he gave his son, how he always wanted to push the stroller. David in a flat cap, part of a yen for all things English that accompanied his rapidly receding hairline. A phase when he even went hunting on his uncle's estate once or twice and when all his clothes had to come from the same shop, run by a woman in a pleated skirt who never looked her customers in the eye.

My attention was drawn to a movement in the gutter across the road. A pigeon was pattering to and fro, upending the odd leaf and pecking at a mound of dirt, as if it had hidden something but no longer remembered where.

I had to wait, it was too soon. Wait until the raw emotions had subsided. David would be angry, disappointed. His son had turned out to have a bad mother, so unreliable that she could vanish from one moment to the next. It would be nothing short of dangerous to face him, in a rage now that the dark suspicions planted by his mother had been confirmed. I was not suitable material for a man of her son's calibre. Not that she ever said as much; a well-timed look of contempt sufficed. David was furious because my disappearance made him feel foolish. Anger prevailed because this was still fresh, and he sensed that I could not be far away, had not yet gone. It first had to dawn on him that I might have disappeared for good, that from this time on he might have to do without me. I would only be welcome if I was no longer expected.

How much time would that take? One hour? Two? Longer?

I had no idea.

Minutes passed and I became afraid that I had broken something that could not be mended, the same black feeling that had taken hold after Sarah's birthday party, a few years ago. Following dinner with the girls, I began knocking back whiskies in the bar of the hotel where some of us were staying, deserted but for a small group of men in the dim light. Sarah wanted to dance before her birthday passed her by. A fair-haired man went behind the bar and had a word with the boy who was wiping down the espresso machine. Perhaps he slipped him some money, they were standing close together as if there was a problem with the machine. Then the boy put a bottle of vodka on the bar. The man put his phone down beside it and we danced to a playlist that seemed to last hours. I remember how strange it felt to hear yourself dancing, the sound of your feet on the floor and singing under your breath instead of blaring along, for even up loud the music from the phone could not fill the space. Sarah took a fancy to the quietest member of the group but it went no further than a bit of a flirt on the dancefloor. The fair-haired man had his eye on me but kept his distance. By that time, I was too drunk to speak. Although I had intended to drive home – it wasn't far – in the end I went back to Helena's room. The battery of my phone was dead, and I passed out within seconds. The next day, David was frantic, calling Helena at seven in the morning to make sure I was safe. I got home to find him at the cooker, stirring a big pot of macaroni, Louis's favourite meal. It was Saturday, just shy of noon. David never cooked. He took one look in my bloodshot eyes and wouldn't so much as glance at me again. When Louis had finished eating and went into the living room to play, David told me I could no longer act like a teenager, that this was behaviour he could not accept. Four days went by before he spoke another word.

I recalled the two of us on a date, towards the end of our first year together. Sitting beside him on our regular park bench, snug in our thick winter coats, enjoying the sunshine, leaving leisurely gaps between one sentence and the next. I leaned my head against his arm and said it was a pity I had never known him as a teenager, that I was curious what he had been like at that age. I said I believed I would have fallen for him then too, without the slightest hesitation. We watched as people strolled by. His answer, steeped in irony, came a little later and never left me. In my family, there is no such thing as a teenager.

Perhaps I should stop thinking and just go home, not prolong the agony. Drive round the block, stop in front of the house, walk up the path and ring the doorbell. Hello, darling. I'm back. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad and tomorrow the entire incident would be reduced to an amusing anecdote. I could tell David that, after an impossible day and then the disaster with my phone, I had gone down to sit on the doorstep for a breath of fresh air. To cap it all, the door had blown shut. And with only my car keys on me, I had decided to go and get help. The local locksmith had refused to shut up shop and come with me, and unable to recall David's mobile number, I had gone into a café and rung the office. Someone whose name had slipped my mind – no, not Michelle, his secretary – said he had already left for the day and so I decided to drive straight back. But there had been an accident and I wound up stuck in traffic...

This is how it would feel, I thought, to cheat on David with another man. My explanations would sound increasingly improbable. In the end, it would be like admitting you had slept with someone but nothing had happened. He would not believe me. Not really. And if he did, I would feel like even more of a deceiver. For not only had I slept with someone, in a manner of speaking, but something had actually happened. Something that, however briefly, I had wanted with all my heart.