

Sophie
Hannah
the
orphan
choir



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The liturgical responses in this book come from real choral services I have attended at St Catherine's College in Cambridge – a wholly wonderful and non-spooky institution whose girls' choir, through no fault of its own, planted the seeds of a spooky story in my mind.

Vouchsafe, O Lord,
To keep us this night without sin.

O Lord, have mercy upon us,
Have mercy upon us.

O Lord, let thy mercy be upon us:
As our trust is in thee.

Turn us again, thou God of hosts:
Show the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole.

O Lord, hear our prayer;
And let our cry come unto thee.

The Lord be with you;
And with thy spirit.

Let us pray.

Give us light in the night season we beseech thee, O Lord,
and grant that what we sing and say with our lips we may believe in
our hearts
and what we believe in our hearts we may show forth in our daily life
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

ONE

September, October

I

It's quarter to midnight. I'm standing in the rain outside my next-door neighbour's house, gripping his rusted railings with cold wet hands, staring down through them at the misshapen and perilously narrow stone steps leading to his converted basement, from which noise is blaring. It's my least favourite song in the world: Queen's 'Don't Stop Me Now'.

There's a reddish-orange light seeping out into the darkness from the basement's bay window that looks as unappealing as the too-loud music sounds. Both make me think of hell: my idea of it. There are no other lights on anywhere in my neighbour's four-storey home.

My lower ground floor next door is dark and silent. We mainly use it as guest accommodation, and as we don't often have guests it is usually empty. It comprises two bedrooms, a playroom-cum-Xbox room for Joseph, and a large bathroom. All of number 19's internal cellar walls have been knocked down to make a single, vast area: either a chill-out den or an entertaining space, depending on whether you're talking to my neighbour or his girlfriend.

I think the label 'entertaining space' worries him because of its public-spirited implications. The word 'entertain' suggests that one might give a toss about people other than oneself. My next-door neighbour doesn't.

Freddy Mercury's reflections about supersonic women are making me glad that I've never met one: they sound like a bit of a handful – not very easy-going. I've never had ambitions in the direction of supersonicness, whatever it might be. What I want is far more achievable, I hope: to be warm, dry, asleep. At the moment, those are the only things I want, the only things I can imagine ever wanting.

The stairs leading from the pavement down to number 19's basement are slimy with moss, rain

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and street gunge. Each step's surface was a perfect rectangle once, but more than a hundred years' worth of feet and weather have worn away corners and edges, making them too uneven to use safely, especially in tonight's waterfall-style downpour. Normally I look at them and feel a twinge of satisfaction. The woman who sold us number 17 had recently had all of its eroded stonework replaced. The steps from our lower ground level up to the street are beautifully straight-edged, with a new black-painted iron handrail bolted on to them for added safety, but what does that matter, really? If I can't sleep in my house when I want to, all its other virtues are somewhat redundant.

Number 19 has no handrail. I don't fancy attempting the descent while water cascades from one step down to the next like a liquid Slinky toy without boundaries, but what choice do I have? If I want to get my neighbour's attention, I'll have to put myself where he can see me, or wait for a gap between songs and bang on the window of the room that he and his friends are in. I've rung the front doorbell seven times and he can't hear me. Of course he can't; Freddie Mercury is drowning out all other sounds.

I'm wearing pink-and-white checked pyjamas, drenched from knee to ankle, a black raincoat and trainers that were waterlogged five seconds after I left the house. My feet now feel as if they're in two flotation tanks, weighing me down. It's the opposite of people putting slabs of concrete in their pockets to make them sink when they wade into water; I am weighed down by water, on the pavement's concrete. This is the kind of rain the skies pour over your head in a never-ending torrent. It's hard to believe it's composed of light individual drops.

I can't help laughing at the absurdity of it as Freddie Mercury invites me to give him a call if I want to have a good time. The problem is that my definition of a good time differs greatly from the song's, and from Mr Fahrenheit's. That's what Stuart and I privately call our neighbour, though his real name is Justin Clay, and I've heard his friends and his girlfriend Angie call him Jub. My definition of a good time is being able to get into bed whenever I want to – yes, even quite early on a Saturday night – and for there to be no pounding rock anthems booming through my wall, preventing me from getting to sleep.

It only happens every two or three Saturdays.

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Thankfully, Mr Fahrenheit spends at least every other weekend at Angie's house, but when her kids are with their dad, Angie comes to stay at number 19 and it's party time – or at least, it sounds to me like a party whenever it happens. Sometimes they decide to make the most of their child-free weekends and play loud music on two consecutive nights, Friday and Saturday. Mr Fahrenheit assures me that it is never a party, always a 'little get-together'. I have tried on four separate occasions to explain to him that I don't mind what we agree to call it as long as he's willing to lower the volume of his music to an acceptable level.

The get-together guests are always the same – the man who wears walking boots with the laces untied and tucks his jeans into his chunky socks; the stooped, too-tall man with the floppy hair and the rucksack; the frizzy-haired chain-smoking dance teacher who works at the performing arts school on Woolnough Road; the fat woman with red glasses and oddly sculpted hair dyed the colour of a blue Persian cat – and Mr Fahrenheit always plays the same songs for them to sing and shout along to, though, to be fair, he does vary the order: '9 to 5' by Dolly Parton, 'Livin' on a Prayer' by Bon

Jovi, Blondie's 'Heart of Glass', A-ha's 'Take on Me', 'Love Shack' by the B-52's, 'Video Killed the Radio Star' – I can't remember who that one's by.

And the centrepiece of his every musical gathering: 'Don't Stop Me Now' by Queen, which expresses my noisy neighbour's attitude to life far better than he himself does. I'm sure he hasn't analysed the lyrics as I have, but I don't think it can be a coincidence that he is a ruthlessly selfish hedonist and the song he blasts out more often than any other – usually two or three times on a party night – is a hymn to his ideology. The narrator in the song is not merely someone who wishes to have a good time (which would be reasonable) but someone who is acutely aware that the fun he intends to have (out of control, like an atom bomb) will adversely affect others to the point that they will find it unbearable and seek to put a stop to it. He anticipates this, and makes it clear that he only wants to hear from those who agree with him about what constitutes a good time.

Stuart would say – has said, often – that it's only a song and I'm reading too much into it. The inaccuracy of the criticism irritates me. The menacing lyrics are there for anyone and everyone to

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hear; there's nothing ambiguous about them. Stuart would be closer to the truth if he accused me not of finding meaning in the words that isn't there, but of imagining that 'Don't Stop Me Now' is more than a song, which is of course scientifically impossible.

Unscientifically, it is the putrid essence of Justin Clay, encapsulated in music. His soul made pop.

Finally, Queen's rant-with-a-tune ends. This is my chance. I know from experience that one song never follows swiftly on from another on these evenings. Efficient DJ'ing is not one of Mr Fahrenheit's strengths. I used to think that the long gaps between musical assaults were his sadistic attempt to lull me into a false sense of security in order to blast me again just as I'm nodding off, but that was unfair of me. I underestimated how long it takes to transfer the various ingredients of an unrolled spliff from a lap to a coffee table without mislaying any of them, especially while stoned, and then shuffle over to the stereo and make a decision about what to play next.

Now that the music's stopped, I can hear muffled voices, though I can't make out what they're saying over the drumming of the rain. Carefully, I make my way down the stone staircase backwards so that

I can hold on to the steps above me as I go. Once at the bottom, I turn and find Angie, the girlfriend, looking at me through the window, which, tonight, is a water feature. 'Jub, the lady from next door's here again,' she says after a few seconds of mute staring, as if shock has delayed her reaction. She's wearing a short green-and-white dress – fabric inspired by a lava lamp, by the look of it – with a longer beige knitted cardigan over it. Bare feet.

'Oh, you are giving me the *joke!*' Mr Fahrenheit cries out. I resist the temptation to ask him if that expression is popular in the playground at the moment. He's bent over his music system, his back to the window. At this proximity, I can hear him easily thanks to the single glazing. He's in no hurry to turn round and engage with me.

Neither he nor Angie seems to have grasped basic cause and effect. They know that I object to their playing of loud music late at night because I've told them so unequivocally, yet they seem surprised when they do it and I turn up at their house to complain. It's clear every time that they have not anticipated my arrival. Afterwards, I can't help pointlessly reciting to Stuart the conversation they must regularly fail to have:

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You know, if she can't sleep because of our music, she'll need to find something else to do to fill up her night. What if that something else is coming round here and giving us a hard time?

Oh, yeah. I see your point. I'd say that's pretty likely to happen, since it's what always happens. If we don't like her coming round and moaning, maybe we shouldn't prevent her from sleeping.

Mr Fahrenheit walks over, opens the window, stands well back from the rain. 'Hello, Louise,' he says, his voice as sullen and weary as his face. 'Come to give me a bollocking?'

I try not to feel hurt, and fail. Was I secretly hoping he'd say, 'Come and join us, grab yourself a drink?' I think I might have been, stupid and naive though it undoubtedly is. I've often thought that if I can't sleep and there happens to be a party going on next door, I could do worse than join in and try to have some fun. I'd have to decline, of course, even if Mr Fahrenheit were to invite me.

I wonder if he knows that I would gladly stop hating him and be ready, even, to like him a bit if he would only show me a tiny bit of consideration.

'I find my midnight visits as inconvenient as you do, Justin,' I tell him. 'Especially when it's cold and

the rain's bucketing down. Are you finished playing music now? It's nearly midnight.'

'No, I'm not *finished* playing music.' He sways backwards.

'Tell her to fuck off,' his walking-boot friend calls out, waving at me from his cross-legged position on the floor next to a free-standing lamp that's as tall as he is, seated, and has what looks like a red tablecloth draped over it. He and the lamp are two islands in a sea of empty wine bottles on their sides. The room looks as if a couple of dozen games of Spin the Bottle have been abandoned in a hurry.

I say to Justin, 'In that case, can you please keep the volume low from now on, so that it doesn't travel through the wall to my house?'

The fat woman with the red glasses appears at Mr Fahrenheit's side. 'Be reasonable, love,' she says. 'It's not midnight yet. Midnight's the cut-off point, isn't it? It is where I live. You've got to admit, you sometimes try to shut us down as early as quarter to eleven.'

'And Justin often plays his music until at least one-thirty,' I say. 'Why don't you encourage *him* to be reasonable? If I've come round before eleven it's because that's when I've wanted to go to sleep.'

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‘God’s sake, Louise, it’s fuckin’ Saturday night,’ Mr Fahrenheit protests.

‘I sometimes go to bed early on Saturdays, and stay up late on Tuesdays,’ I tell him. ‘What if I was an airline pilot, and had to get up at four in the morning to—’ I bring my sentence to an emergency stop, not wanting to give Mr Fahrenheit the chance to tell me I’m not an airline pilot and imagine he’s proved me wrong. ‘Look, all I want is to be able to go to bed when I want and sleep uninterrupted by your noise. *Please*, Justin.’ I put on my best friendly, hopeful smile.

He raises his hands and backs away from me, as if I’ve got a gun pointed at him: one he knows isn’t loaded. ‘Louise . . . I’d like you to *fuck* off back home now, if you wouldn’t mind. You’ve spoiled my evening again, like you’ve spoiled I don’t know how many evenings – well done. Nice one. I’m not wasting any more of my time arguing with you, so . . . go home, or argue with yourself, whichever you’d prefer.’

‘Chill out, next-door neighbaah!’ the man with the floppy fringe yells at me from the far side of the room. He’s sitting at the big dining table that’s dotted with torn Rizla packets and wine stains.

The table stands directly beneath the elaborate glass chandelier, pushed up against the room's only wallpapered wall. The paper is pale blue with gold violin-shaped swirls all over it. It's beautiful, actually, and was probably expensive, but brings on eye-ache if you look at it for too long. Mr Fahrenheit cares a lot about interior design. He cares equally about getting drunk and high, and not at all about tidying up. His house is an odd mixture of two distinct styles: camera-ready aspirational and documentary-reminiscent den of vice – ashtrays kicked over on expensive sisal flooring, takeaway cartons sitting in front of designer chairs as if they're matching footstools.

Floppy Fringe Man shares Mr Fahrenheit's dress sense: checked shirt over a white T-shirt, faded jeans. The only difference is in their choice of shoe: Mr Fahrenheit favours a hybrid trainer-clog and Floppy Fringe wears a range of cowboy boots. I spot his rucksack, leaning against tonight's pair. The drugsack, I call it.

'Liking the raincoat,' the frizzy-haired dance teacher says loudly to the room, not looking at me. 'Hood up, drawstrings pulled tight – stylish.' The rest of them laugh.

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This is the first time Mr Fahrenheit has sworn at me, the first time his friends have weighed in on his side. I wait for the feelings of humiliation to subside, and tell myself that it doesn't matter what some rude strangers think about my raincoat. I hope I don't cry. When I feel calm enough to speak, I say, 'You can ignore me tonight, Justin, but my problem with your behaviour isn't going to go away. If you won't listen to me, I'll have to find someone who will. Like the police, maybe.'

'Good luck, mate,' says Angie, stressing the last word sarcastically. 'And...dream on. No one's going to stop us listening to a few songs in our own house on a Saturday night.'

'Whose house?' Justin teases her. She pretends to laugh along but I don't think she enjoys the joke as much as he does.

'Louise!' He points at me, arm raised. More of a salute, really. 'I promise you, one day you'll find yourself on the receiving end of the killjoy shit you're so keen on giving out. Yeah! Wherever you're living when your boy's a teenager, unless it's somewhere out in the sticks with no neighbours, some twat's going to bang on your windows when your lad and his pals are letting their hair down and

you're going to think, "What a fucking twat, they're just having a laugh." You know what, Louise? You're that twat, right here and now.' He nods as if he's said something profound. 'Oh, wait, sorry – I forgot, your son's already left home, hasn't he? You've sent him away – isn't that right? How old is he, again? Seven? Bet your house is nice and quiet without him. That why you did it? All this choir shit just an excuse, is it? What, did he turn up the theme tune of fuckin'... *Balamory* a bit too loud one day?'

I am a solid block of shock. I cannot believe my neighbour would say that to me. That he would think it, even when angry. He couldn't have said it if he hadn't first thought it.

He did. Both. Said and thought.

I can't find anything to say in response. It would serve Justin right if I were still standing here this time tomorrow, glued to the ground by his cruel words.

'Leave it, Jub,' Angie warns. She sounds anxious. I wonder if I look alarming: as if I'm considering climbing in through the window – a dripping, hooded black figure – and choking the life out of him. What an appealing idea.

'She sent her seven-year-old son away?' the dance teacher asks. 'What the *fuck*?'

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‘Would you rather I played *classical* music?’ Mr Fahrenheit taunts me. ‘Would you still be such a fuckin’ killjoy if I played, I don’t know . . . Mozart?’

I wonder why he’s imitating Hitler, with his finger in a line over his upper lip. Then I realise it’s not a moustache; he’s pushing his nose up to indicate snobbery.

‘Mozart?’ Walking Boots laughs. ‘Like you’ve got any.’

‘I have, as it goes,’ Mr Fahrenheit tells him. ‘You’ve got to have your classical music. Isn’t that right, Louise?’ To his friends, he says, ‘Wanna hear some, you lowbrow wasters?’

No one does. They groan, swear, laugh.

‘Looks like it’s just you and me, Louise – the cultured ones. Culture vultures.’ He leans closer to the rain barrier between us to wink at me.

I can’t be here any more. As quickly as I can without slipping, I climb the steps to the street and hurry home, to the riotous applause of Mr Fahrenheit and his friends.



‘Stuart. Stuart!’ Words alone aren’t going to do it. I push his shoulder with the tips of my fingers.

He opens his eyes and stares at me, flat on his back. ‘What?’

‘Can you hear that? Listen.’

‘Louise. It had better be the morning.’

I disagree. Until I have had at least six hours’ sleep, it had better not be. I can sleep in later now that I don’t have to get Joseph ready for school, which is why I never do. Every morning I switch on at 6.30, exactly the time I used to have to get up; it’s my body’s daily protest against the absence of my son.

‘Sorry. Middle of the night,’ I say. I cannot allow myself to define the present moment as morning, even though technically it is. I haven’t had my night yet. This is the Noisy Neighbour Paradox: does one say, ‘But it’s three in the morning!’ to impress upon the selfish oaf next door that it’s very, very late? ‘Four in the morning’, ‘five in the morning’? At what point does it start to sound as if, actually, busy people are already singing in the shower, pushing the ‘on’ buttons on their espresso machines, preparing to jog to the office?

Stuart reaches up with both hands for the two

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sides of his pillow, left and right of his head, and tries to fold them over his face as if he's packing himself carefully for delivery somewhere. 'Middle of the night,' he says. 'Then I should still be asleep.'

'Can you hear the music?'

'Yes, but it's not going to stop me from sleeping. I've got a wife for that.'

'It's Verdi. Before that we had Bizet, a bit of Puccini.'

The security light on the St John's College flats at the back of us comes on, shines in my face. A car must have driven too close to the building. I lean forward and drag our single bedroom curtain to the right. The curtain is too narrow; we have to choose which side of the window we want to leave exposed: the security light side or the students' bedroom windows side.

'Mr F must have got a "Best of the Classics" CD free with his Saturday paper,' Stuart says, closing his eyes again.

'It's aimed at me,' I tell him. 'A melodic "fuck you". He's bored of attacking me with his music, so now he's doing it with what he thinks of as mine.'

'Isn't that a bit paranoid?'

I could admit that I've been next door, had yet another argument with Mr Fahrenheit, that the subject of classical music came up. That's the context Stuart's missing. If I told him, he would concede that I'm right about the malice in this latest noise-attack, but he would also criticise me – critisult me, Joseph would say; his invented word that he's so proud of, a hybrid of criticise and insult – for going round on my own: a defenceless woman without my husband to protect me. And then I might critisult him back, because I'm exhausted and frustrated and would find it hard to be tactful. I might raise my voice and point out that whenever I suggest we visit Mr Fahrenheit together to lodge our complaint, or that Stuart goes instead of me for a change, he always responds in the same way: 'Come on, Lou, let's not steam in there. Look, we don't want a scene if we can avoid one, do we? He might call it a night soon.'

Call it a night, call it a morning. Call it a party, call it a little get-together.

That's why I go and complain alone. Because my husband always wants to give it more time, to satisfy himself that we're not a pair of troublemaking hotheads.

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'I'm going to ring the police,' I say.

'What?' Stuart hauls himself into a sitting position and rubs the inner corners of his eyes with his thumbs, his hands protruding from his face like antlers. 'Lou, put the brakes on a second, please. The police?'

Yes, yes, the police. The Cambridge police. Not the SS, just a nice, polite, helpful PC in uniform, to say something soothing like, 'Can I respectfully ask that you turn the volume down, please, sir?' They're hardly going to storm Mr Fahrenheit's Farrow-&-Ball-reinforced drug den and riddle him with bullets. More's the pity.

'I can't get to sleep with that coming through the wall, Stuart. What else can I do? I've tried talking to him more than a dozen times, and nothing changes. He doesn't even pretend it will! He's proudly, defiantly noisy, except he calls it "not noisy".'

Stuart reaches for the chain on his bedside lamp and pulls. Then, as if the light is an affront to the room full of night that he ought to be sleeping in, he turns it off again. 'Maybe ringing the police is a sensible next step, but not tonight, Lou.'

'When, then?'

'First thing tomorrow?' Stuart says hopefully.

'What, when Mr Fahrenheit's asleep and there's

no music playing?’ I assume this will be enough to alert my husband to his temporary lapse into idiocy, but apparently not.

‘Yeah. You don’t need “Video Killed the Radio Star” pounding out to prove your point. You can explain the situation, the history. It’s not as if the police are going to doubt you.’

‘Really? You don’t think their first thought will be, “Hmm, I wonder if the neighbour’s music really *is* too loud or whether this woman is a neurotic spoilsport trying to make sure no one has any fun. If only we could *hear* the music and judge for ourselves – that would be really helpful”?’

‘All right, look, I just think... I need to go to sleep, Lou. Imran’s coming first thing in the morning. If you can’t sleep in here, go up to the attic and sleep on the sofa bed in my study.’

No. No. I want to sleep in my own bed. If I sleep anywhere else, Mr Fahrenheit has won. And I wouldn’t be able to fall asleep, anyway; I would lie flat on my back, rigid as a floorboard, with my heart pounding, and the knowledge that I had allowed myself to be driven out of my own bedroom buzzing in my brain like an unswatatable fly.

Stuart says, ‘If you ring the police now and they

say they'll come out, that means me staying up God knows how long –'

'No, it doesn't,' I say, in what I hope is a calm and helpful voice. I employ the same tactics with my husband as I do with my inconsiderate shit of a next-door neighbour: better not to let them see how angry I am in case they use it against me. 'You can sleep. I'm awake anyway. I'll deal with the police, assuming they can come at such short notice.'

Stuart jolts in the bed, as if I've dropped a hand grenade into his lap. 'I'm not letting you do that on your own,' he says. 'Please, can we just leave it for tonight? I'm knackered, Lou. You must be too.'

Him first, me second. It doesn't mean he's selfish, I tell myself. It's only natural to think of yourself first. We all do it. I'm selfish too. It's lucky no one can read my mind and see the list of things I would allow to happen to Mr Fahrenheit rather than have him disrupt any more of my nights.

Stuart hasn't spotted that my pyjama bottoms are drenched from the knees down. I suppose it must be hard to see a detail like that in the dark. If he notices, he will accuse me of lacking a sense of proportion; he wouldn't willingly get his clothes

soaked unless someone's life was at stake and even then it might have to be a blood relative.

'You're right,' I say neutrally. 'I'll go up to the attic. You go back to sleep. Sorry I woke you.'

'Good,' Stuart says with relief. He is so gullible. I love my husband, but there is no doubt that my life flows more easily when I tell him as little as possible. This isn't a new development; I first noticed it shortly after Joseph was born, though I would find it hard to point to any actual secrets I've kept – it's always tiny things I've forgotten by the next day. I have the form of a deceiver without the content.

Stuart makes his 'I'm too tired to say goodnight' noise. I know he'll be unconscious again within seconds, loud Verdi notwithstanding. His talent for sleeping in almost any conditions is the reason he is able to be so sanguine about Mr Fahrenheit's weekend disturbances: his sleep is not threatened, only mine.

'This... Imran, tomorrow,' I say. 'Can you... delay him?'

'Not really. He's coming at eight-thirty. Realistically, he's going to be here an hour at least, and we have to be at Saviour for ten –'

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'No, I mean . . . can you tell him not to come at all? Just . . . I mean, we don't have to rush into it, do we?'

'He's supposed to be starting a week on Monday. What?' Stuart turns on his bedside lamp. 'What does that face mean? Louise, we've been through this.'

'Thirty thousand pounds is a lot of money to spend on a house we might not be staying in, especially when there's no real need.'

'Might not be staying? Since when? Is this about Mr Fahrenheit?'

'I don't want to live next door to him,' I say.

Stuart expresses his displeasure by leaning forward and falling on to his side across the bed. He picks up my pillow and covers his face with it. 'That's the opposite of what you said yesterday. You said, "I'm not being driven out of—"'

'I've changed my mind.'

'Well, look, if you're serious about moving, definitely don't ring the police. You have to declare any official noise disputes with neighbours when you sell a house, or your buyer can sue you.'

I wonder if this means we could sue our vendor. She told us she wanted to move because the house

was too big for a woman living alone. I wonder if that was only part of the reason.

‘I can’t live next door to Justin Clay,’ I tell Stuart. ‘Even if he never plays a single song ever again, I can’t stand being so close to him, not now that I know what he’s like. It’s like . . . living in enemy territory. Seriously, Stuart, can you text Imran now and cancel him?’

If I told him what Justin said about our sending Joseph away in order to have a quieter house, would it make a difference? For the moment, I can’t face it. All I want is to push as far away from myself as possible the knowledge that it happened, the memory of it.

‘I’m not making any decisions now, Lou, and neither are you. We both need to get some rest. Please?’

Which means he is not going to text Imran and tell him not to come tomorrow. By the time he wakes up it will be too late: Imran will be on his way.

A sharp spurt of disillusionment dulls and solidifies, as they tend to these days, into a small grey stone that rolls slowly down a spiral slide – one that narrows as it descends – until it falls off

at the bottom and into the pit of my stomach, and then I don't feel anything any more, once the slight discomfort of the dropping and landing is over.

Obviously I know that there isn't really a spiral slide inside my body, and that a flattened hope cannot transform into a grey pebble. It's funny that sometimes you can only describe something with perfect accuracy by being wildly inaccurate.

'Tomorrow afternoon, soon as we get back, I'll go next door and have a word with Fahrenheit, the ignorant tosser,' Stuart promises. 'I'll tell him, final warning, or we're going to make an official complaint.'

'Why wait till the afternoon?' I ask. 'Why not eight in the morning, before Imran gets here?'

Stuart chuckles. 'Have you ever known Mr F to surface before midday?'

'So . . . you don't want to wake him up?'

He looks caught out. Then he says, 'We might as well give the peace talks a chance, Lou. If we wake him at eight, he won't be amenable to anything we say.'

Cowardice dressed up as strategy. Another little grey pebble loops down the helter-skelter, slowing as it goes, contrary to the laws of whatever

the scientific term is for the acceleration of small things rolling downwards.

I pat Stuart's arm. 'Go to sleep,' I say. 'Busy day tomorrow.'



The phone rings once before I pounce on it. 'Hello?'

'Mrs Beeston?'

'Yes, it's me.'

'It's Trevor Chibnall, environmental health officer for Cambridge City Council, returning your call.'

'Yes.' Who else would it be at two in the morning? And he isn't returning my call; that makes it sound as if I left a message for him.

'I believe you contacted the police with regard to a noise nuisance issue, and they advised you to contact the council?'

He believes? It's what I told him when we spoke a few minutes ago. I'm tempted to say, 'No, that's completely wrong,' to see if he says, 'But . . . it's what you told me yourself, before.'

'Thanks for ringing me back,' I say instead, though I don't understand why he created the need

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by ending our first telephone conversation. He didn't explain, just asked for my name and number and said he'd be in touch shortly. I assumed the worst – that he meant days, maybe even weeks – and asked what 'shortly' meant, only to find that my outrage had nowhere to go when he said ten to fifteen minutes.

He is as good as his word, and now I have nowhere to put my unsubstantiated feelings of abandonment. They flap around my heart like empty sacks of flesh after liposuction.

'The number the police gave you is the out-of-hours emergency number. Do you have a noise situation that you'd classify as an emergency?'

I try to focus on Chibnall's question and not his tone, which, in isolation, would be enough to convince me that nothing will happen soon if he has anything to do with it. His voice is deep, serious and devoid of drive. It would be great for telling a coma victim not to resist, to move towards the light.

'It's an emergency in the sense that I'd like something done about it now,' I say. 'I'm still hoping I might get some sleep tonight.' *In my own bed.* 'Can you hear that music?'

'Yes.'

'Loud, isn't it? It's not playing in my house. That's my neighbour.' Knowing nothing about Chibnall's musical preferences, I do not add, *It might be Rachmaninov at the moment but it was Wagner ten minutes ago.*

'Your address, please?'

'Seventeen Weldon Road.'

'Cambridge?'

No, Southampton. That's why I rang Cambridge's environmental health department. 'Yes.'

'Your full name, please?'

I'm not liking the way this is going. His reactions seem off. Or rather, he's not reacting at all, when he ought to be. I was hoping that our dialogue might go as follows:

Loud, isn't it? It's not playing in my house. That's my neighbour.

You're kidding me? Seriously? Wow, that is beyond appalling! There's no way you should have to put up with that at this time of night! Right — sit tight, and I'll come round and sort the bastard out.

What's the point of having an emergency noise officer if tidings of inappropriate noise don't send him over the edge into vengeful hysteria?

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'Louise Caroline Beeston,' I tell him.

'And your postcode?'

'CBI 2YL.'

'Your neighbour's full address?'

'Nineteen Weldon Road. Same postcode, I assume.'

'Yes, it is.'

How does he know that? Is he sitting next to a whiteboard covered in photographs of Cambridge's most malevolent noise pests, with the details of each one scrawled in blue wipe-off pen beneath his or her mugshot: the public enemies Chibnall and his team have been hunting for years, but they've never been able to make anything stick?

Either that or I watch too much television.

'And you've lived at number seventeen for how long?' he asks me. No intonation whatsoever.

'Five months.' What does it matter how long I've lived here?

'And your neighbour's been at number nineteen for how long?'

I take a deep breath. Then another. How long is he going to linger over boring, unimportant details? 'Since we moved in. That's all I know.'

'What's your neighbour's full name?'

'His name's Justin Clay. I don't know if he's got a middle name.' Wanting to remind Chibnall that I'm a person and not merely a data source, I say, 'My husband and I call him Mr Fahrenheit. You know, from the Queen song, "Don't Stop Me Now"? He plays it all the time. So . . . please do. Stop him now.' I fake a laugh, then feel like an idiot.

'And Mr Clay has been resident at number nineteen since you moved into number seventeen?' Chibnall asks, his bland manner unaffected by my attempt to make our conversation more interesting.

'Yes.'

'How many people live at number nineteen in total?'

Oh, God, this is unbearable. Is he going to ask me if Mr Fahrenheit has any pets? Is his plan to solve my problem by asking me pointless questions until I die of old age? 'Just him. Though his girlfriend stays a lot.'

'But she isn't a permanent resident of the house?'

'No.'

'Can you describe to me the nature of the problem?' says Chibnall.

'Every second or third Saturday night, he plays loud music that stops me from getting to sleep. I

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can feel the bass-line pounding in my house.'

'Approximately from what time until what time, or does it vary?'

'Not really. They always go to the pub for a few drinks first, so it tends to start at about ten. And finishes between one and one-thirty. Hello?' I say, when Chibnall doesn't respond.

'It's later than one-thirty now,' he says.

'Yes. This is the latest he's ever gone on, and it's his way of saying "Screw you". I went round about two hours ago and asked him to turn it down. This is my punishment. But even when he's not punishing me, the music is always this loud or louder and it usually has lyrics, and Mr... Clay and his friends all yell along to them.' *Drunkenly*. I don't say that, in case I sound prudish. Which I'm not. I have friends who drink far too much and who wouldn't dream of depriving their neighbours of sleep or peace of mind. It's possible to be a considerate alcoholic. 'I mean, that's not okay for him to do that to me, is it? Can you... I mean, is there something you can do to stop him? He must be breaking a law – disturbance of the peace, antisocial behaviour –'

'Someone would need to come out to you to assess the situation before offering an opinion.'

'Right.' My rage pulls itself tight inside me. 'So ... could that person be you, tonight?' I try to disguise my sarcasm as harmless banter, and end up sounding like a grotesque parody of a Hollywood romantic comedy. I grimace at myself in the mirror above the fireplace. My skin looks faded. I have too little colour, while everything else in my lounge has too much: the purple flowers on the curtains seem to throb against the mint green background; the white wall behind me looks almost yellow. It's the light: up too high, parodying daytime. It should have been switched off hours ago. I would turn it down, but I'm too far from the dimmer switch, and there's something grimly satisfying about this ghastly vision of my haggard self: this is what Mr Fahrenheit has done to me.

'If I can fit you in before handover, I'll attend myself,' Trevor Chibnall says. 'If not, it'll be my colleague. I think that's going to be more likely. Either way, someone should be with you within the hour.'

'Oh.' This is unexpected. I run his words through my mind a few times to check I understood them correctly. Yes, it seems so. Apparently something is going to happen. The inert voice misled me; Trevor

Chibnall is about to spring into action. I hope it's the action of sending his colleague rather than himself. I am willing to wait longer if I can have someone who knows how to put expression into his or her voice. 'Great,' I say.

'Thank you for your call.'

'Wait, I...if you send someone out to me, is that an official thing?' I ask. 'I mean, does it get...recorded somewhere, formally? My husband thinks we might have trouble selling the house if we register a noise problem and then -'

'No, nothing becomes official in that sense simply by our coming out to you.'

'Not that we *want* to move, and hopefully we won't have to, but -'

'It's not helpful to us when people spread scare stories about it being impossible to sell houses because of a noise dispute with a neighbour,' he says. 'If we find that there's a noise nuisance, we take steps to remedy the situation.'

From someone more imaginative, this might be a euphemism for slicing Mr Fahrenheit's head clean off his neck. Not from Chibnall, I don't think. I picture him thinking inertly about the filling in of forms, looking as washed-out under the glare

of the neon lights in his office as I look in my lounge mirror. I can't assemble a face for him in my imagination: a featureless taupe blur is the best I can do.

'Once it's remedied, there's no reason why someone wouldn't buy a house that formerly had a noise problem,' he drones on. 'But we can't find evidence of a noise nuisance and set about rectifying it if people don't report these things because they've heard from a friend or a colleague that they reported a similar problem and were then obliged to declare it and couldn't sell their house.'

'I agree,' I tell him. Though in theory I'm happy to gang up with the council's environmental health officer against my husband, I'm slightly concerned that he seems more exercised about scaremongering in relation to the sale of houses than about Mr Fahrenheit's behaviour. 'That's why I'm reporting it, and very much looking forward to your rectification.'

'An environmental health officer will be with you shortly, Mrs Beeston,' says Chibnall.

'Thank you.'

The line goes dead. I put the phone back on its base, go to the kitchen where Mr Fahrenheit's

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music is slightly less audible, fill the kettle with water and switch it on. I need strong tea. It's past two in the morning, I'm exhausted, and I'm about to have what I can only think of as a very important meeting.

I wonder if I need to prepare in any way. Nothing about the house needs sorting out; everything is in order and ready to give a good impression: no empty wine bottles on their sides, no upturned ashtrays.

No evidence that a child lives here. All Joseph's toys are tidily packed away in his room, as they have been since the beginning of term.

I drum the palms of my hands on the kitchen countertop while I wait for the kettle to boil. Will Chibnall, or his colleague, need to inspect the whole house, every floor? What if he asks me why there's a room that clearly belongs to a child but is empty? He's bound to be thorough, to want to see how far the noise from Mr Fahrenheit's stereo travels, but maybe if I close Joseph's door then he won't go in there.

I have a better idea: if I close Joseph's door, I can tell Chibnall that Joseph is in there, asleep. Yes, it's a lie, but a harmless one. I might not even

need to tell him explicitly. There's a sign Bluetacked to the door saying 'Joseph's Room', each shaky capital letter a different colour. If Chibnall sees that on a closed door, he will assume that there's a sleeping child behind it, and won't ask to be let in. Anyone would make that assumption. Where else would a seven-year-old boy be in the early hours of a Sunday morning but at home, safely tucked up in his bed?

Stop it. Don't think it.

Safe in his bed, with his mum and dad just along the hall in case he needs anything in the night, in case he has a bad dream and needs a cuddle . . .

I bend over, gasp for breath. Why do I do this to myself? It might not be so bad if I didn't fill my mind with the very words that will hurt me the most. There's another way of defining Joseph's absence, one that's nowhere near as painful. Other words to describe the situation, which is, in so many ways, a good and fortunate situation – so why do I never use them?

The sound of the kettle clicking off snaps me back to sanity. I move towards it, put my face near the steam; close enough to feel its wet warmth without risking a burn.

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Was I really, only a few seconds ago, planning to deceive the council's emergency noise person about the whereabouts of my son? Crazy. I mustn't do it. It would imply guilt that, according to Stuart, I have no need to feel. We have done nothing wrong: the opposite. We'd be harming Joseph by keeping him at home, harming his future. I will tell Chibnall the truth, and, if he looks disapproving, I will pretend to be Stuart and say all the things he says to me several times a day.

Warning myself that I shouldn't – silently insisting that I won't and am not – I open the drawer where I keep tea towels. I lift them all out and take out the small plastic pouch full of cannabis that I stole from Mr Fahrenheit's house a few weeks ago when I went round to complain. We were standing in his kitchen, which has a large granite-topped island at its centre – extra drug preparation space – and shiny silver pans hanging down from the ceiling above it like a contemporary art chandelier. Mr Fahrenheit got angry with me and left the room, and I picked up one of the three little bags of marijuana from the island and slipped it into my jeans pocket.

I wonder what effect it would have on me.

Would I relax so much that I wouldn't care about anything any more? I haven't got any cigarettes or Rizlas in the house, so I can't roll a joint, but I've watched Mr Fahrenheit do it another way: with a plastic bottle, a hole burned out of its bottom. The bottle fills up with smoke at a certain point, I think, but I'm not sure how or if there's any other equipment involved – I only saw Mr Fahrenheit do it once, when I was walking past his house and he'd forgotten to close the curtains. He was on his own in his lounge. He takes drugs in every part of his house, every day, Stuart and I have worked out, but only ever listens to music in the basement.

Sighing, because I would try some if it were easier but it isn't, I put the little plastic bag back in the drawer and cover it with the tea towels. I probably ought to throw it away in case Trevor Chibnall stumbles upon it, but I don't want to. And he's unlikely to root around in my kitchen drawers. How ridiculous that I'm worried about him discovering my son's absence but not my stash of illegal drugs.

I stir two sugars into my milky tea, although I don't normally take sugar. It will give me some energy.

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The Rachmaninov stops. I wonder what Mr Fahrenheit will play next. He must be sick of classical music by now.

Come on, Mr F. Put something on, anything. Something really crass and intrusive that will prove my point, so that I won't need to say anything at all when Chibnall arrives.

My doorbell rings.



‘It stopped a few seconds before you rang the bell, literally,’ I tell Patricia Jervis, the Trevor Chibnall substitute who is sitting on my sofa, holding the mug of Earl Grey I made her in one hand and a pen in the other. She is short and stocky – in her late fifties, I’d guess – with curly grey hair held back from her make-up-free face by a green sweatband that is consistent with the rest of her PE teacher look: navy blue tracksuit, ribbed white socks, blue-and-grey trainers. I have been told to call her Pat because everyone else does, though she sounded far from happy about everyone else doing so when she said it. She’s writing in a notebook that is balanced on her lap. ‘Are you parked right outside?’ I ask her.

‘Hmm?’ she says without looking up. ‘Yes. Yes, I am.’

Five seconds to lock her car and check it’s locked, another seven to walk to my front door...I know from my own experience that whenever Mr Fahrenheit’s music is audible in my house, it’s also audible from the street. ‘Didn’t you hear anything when you first got out of the car?’ I ask. ‘Classical music. It was loud. You must have heard it.’

Pat Jarvis smiles down at her notebook. ‘There’s nothing wrong with my hearing,’ she says, dodging the question. ‘We all have to take hearing tests regularly. If you’re worried that I don’t believe you, don’t be. Our department handles upwards of two hundred noise disputes a year. Would you care to guess in how many of those cases the complainant turns out not to have a valid objection?’

I shake my head.

‘This year so far, none. Last year there was one. People don’t sit up all night chatting to environmental health officers because they like the attention. It tends to be a desperate last resort.’

‘Yes.’ She wouldn’t like it if I threw myself at her feet and said, ‘Thank you for understanding.’

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Does everyone do that as well as calling her Pat?
Has anyone ever done it?

‘Seems to be an unfortunate fact of life that those adversely affected by noise nuisance are often so doubtful they’ll be believed and so reluctant to cause trouble that they suffer in silence for years.’

‘Or suffer in noise,’ I quip.

‘Yes, they suffer in noise for years.’ She repeats my silly joke, straight-faced, then smiles at her notebook again. ‘Meanwhile, the antisocial neighbours responsible for the anguish and disruption tend to have no such confidence problems,’ she says. ‘No doubts about their rights and righteousness whatsoever. They’re convinced that any official procedure will find in their favour, and couldn’t be more astonished when we tell them we’re going to be taking legal action against them if they don’t adjust their behaviour.’

Anguish. Legal action. These are all good words. I prefer Pat Jervis to Trevor Chibnall. I prefer her vocabulary. She bends forward to rub her ankle with her left hand. I noticed as she wandered around my kitchen looking at the seascapes on the wall that she rocks slightly to the left and right as she walks. ‘You like paintings of the sea, then,’ she said, touching

the glass of one frame with the tip of her index finger. I told her the sea was only in the kitchen; none of the other rooms have themed art. I am averse to themed anything, generally, and have no idea why I decided to fill the walls of one particular room of my house with pictures of boats, sandy beaches, waves against distant horizons; I told Pat Jervis that too. 'Very interesting,' she said, sounding as if she meant it, but, at the same time, wanted to draw a line under the subject.

I am working on a theory that people employed by the council are not the same as the rest of us. It's still in the early stages of development.

Pat asks me all the same questions that Trevor Chibnall asked and more. She writes down my answers. I notice that her hands look older than the rest of her – the skin dry and creased like paper – and decide that it would make a good horror story: a woman whose job it is to transcribe – day after day, night after night – the details of other people's suffering, and whose hands age prematurely as a result.

Her voice is friendly enough, though making eye contact seems to be a problem for her. Does each member of the environmental health department

have a different strength that compensates for another team member's weakness? Maybe Chibnall, if he were here, would give me the most amazing, sympathetic, bonding looks to offset his monotone and I would end up liking him better.

'Any children live in the house with you?' Pat asks.

I pull myself up straight. 'Yes, but . . . not at the moment.'

'That's fine.' She writes on her pad. 'Joint custody situation? Child from a previous marriage?'

'No, I . . .' It's not fine. It's not fine at all. 'My son Joseph lives here during the school holidays. He's seven.'

'But he lives here at least some of the time?' Pat asks.

Did she notice how terrible that sounded? How bad a mother it made me sound? If her manner were less straightforward I would suspect her of snideness, of deliberately crafting a double-edged comment that I can't prove she meant in the worst way.

'Just that it's useful in a noise case if we can say a child lives in the affected house. Homework, good night's sleep, all that stuff. We trot it all out.' Pat

chuckles into her tea. 'Ironic, since children are far less bothered by noise disturbances than adults, as a rule, but there you go.'

Did she say 'the afflicted house'? No. 'Affected', it must have been.

Stuart and I don't have to worry about Joseph's homework, and neither does Pat Jervis; the doing of it will never take place at home. This has been put to me as one of the great advantages of the status quo. When our family is reassembled, in the school holidays, we can relax and have fun together, and Stuart and I will never have to harangue Joseph about learning his times tables, as the parents of day-schoolers have to.

'All right,' says Pat, looking down at her notes. 'So you've attempted to discuss the situation with Mr Clay on numerous occasions, and he's been consistently unsympathetic to your predicament – would you say that's an accurate description of what's occurred?'

'Yes.'

'Yes,' Pat repeats.

'Until tonight, what's always happened is that he's argued with me, then reluctantly agreed to turn it down a bit, but he's always turned it back up by

the time I've got back home and taken off my coat.'

'Doesn't surprise me at all,' says Pat. 'It's a classic tactic. He's banking on you being too embarrassed or tired to go back a second time in one night. Have you ever?'

'No.'

'No,' she echoes me again. 'If you did, do you know what he'd say? "I turned it down. You asked me to turn it down and I did." And he'd think he was clever for saying it. Now, is there anything I haven't asked or you haven't told me that you think I need to know?'

'Nothing that has anything to do with the noise issue specifically,' I say.

'Spit it out,' Pat says briskly.

'Just... about my son not being here. Justin Clay's probably going to tell you that I sent my son away because he made too much noise in the house, and that's just rubbish. It's a lie.'

Pat looks up at me. Finally. 'You'd better tell me the situation with your son,' she says.

'He's a pupil at Saviour College School, a boarder. He has to be – they won't let you be in the choir and live at home. Yeah.' I nod, seeing Pat raise her eyebrows. 'They're the great Saviour

College and they know best about everything. My son's a junior probationer in the boys' choir, which is the absolute elite of the school – oh, it's all so ridiculous to anyone outside Saviour's stupid, closeted, music-obsessed little . . . bubble! I mean, does it make sense to you? A school with four hundred-odd pupils, three hundred and eighty-four of whom have a choice of whether to board or not, or they can board during the week and go home at weekends, and then there are the sixteen choirboys who are forcibly separated from their families for the whole of each term, no matter what those families happen to think about it. It's like some kind of . . . awful primitive sacrifice!

'Mrs Beeston . . .' Pat Jervis leans forward.

'You can call me Louise.'

'Louise. I don't mean to sound uncaring, but . . . how does this relate to the dispute between yourself and Mr Clay? This is about his antisocial behaviour, not your family's educational choices.'

'Yes.'

Except I don't have a choice. Dr Ivan Freeman, director of music at Saviour, believes that Joseph, as one of his precious choir's probationers, belongs to him at least as much as he belongs to me and Stuart. In Dr

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Freeman's eyes, we have as little right to comment as Mr Fahrenheit has in mine.

'I know a bit about Saviour College,' Pat says. 'Friend of mine's a bed-maker there, took me to see the boys' choir once, in the chapel. They were brilliant. I say go for it, much as you'd rather have your son here – I appreciate that, but it's an amazing opportunity for him. My friend says Saviour's choristers have gone on to have amazing musical careers, some of them – famous opera singers, prize-winning classical composers, all sorts. Real star stuff, she says. If your boy does well in that choir, he'll be set up for life. And don't they waive the fees for choirboys? You can't say no to a deal like that, can you?'

'On the noise nuisance front, what's the next step?' I ask abruptly. Pat's speech about the benefits of a Saviour chorister education is uncannily similar to the one Dr Freeman regularly delivers. I've also heard versions of it from several of the other choirboys' parents. I suppose they have to try and believe it's worth it.

'Next step.' Pat slaps her notebook closed, making me jump. 'If you're happy to make it official, I can arrange to have a communication sent out to Mr

Clay on Monday morning, first class post, so he'll get it Tuesday. At first all we do is notify him that a complaint's been made, what might happen down the line –'

'Which is what?'

'Well, we'll inform him that we'll be monitoring the situation,' says Pat.

Monitoring. That sounds like a terrifying disincentive.

'Any instances of unwelcome noise in the future, you call us out straight away, we assess the disturbance. If we agree it's a problem, we speak to Mr Clay in person, give him a final chance to behave reasonably. If he persists with the nuisance, we serve him with a noise abatement order.'

I try to listen to her, but the paranoid babble in my head is drowning out her voice. What if he does what he did tonight every time: turns off the music when he sees her car pull up outside my house so that she never catches him, never has a chance to assess his noise and label it problematic?

I'm so tired; my brain feels like a swollen balloon that's about to burst.

'After that, assuming he violates the order, we're into serious measures,' Pat is saying. 'Confiscating

his music equipment – speakers, sound system. Sometimes it goes as far as a court case. People are fined, some spend time behind bars.’

A custodial sentence for playing Queen at too high a volume? ‘Really?’ I say.

‘I’ve known noise pests to be that stubborn, yes.’

I picture Mr Fahrenheit in the dock, facing a stretch in solitary confinement. I kind of hope it goes as far as a trial at least, though I wouldn’t honestly want him to be locked up: that would be excessive. I am feeling more lenient, now that Pat has convinced me she can solve my problem.

I realise that until she does, I can’t put the house up for sale. Legal obligations notwithstanding, I couldn’t live with myself if I sold it with an untamed Mr Fahrenheit next door. No, there’s a better way: Pat will sort everything out, and then I’ll be able to tell our buyer the full story, complete with happy ending. And give them Pat’s phone number, just in case Mr Fahrenheit tries his luck again once I’m gone.

‘Nine cases out of ten, the first letter we send out does the trick,’ Pat says. ‘Oh, it’d be very useful if you could log all incidents, keep a noise diary – also, of any interactions between you and your

neighbour, your husband and your neighbour, even your son, though obviously he's not here at the moment. But when he is. Anything at all. There's no knowing at this point what we're going to need, so, if in doubt, put it in the log. Depending on how stubborn your neighbour is and how much he wants a fight, it might come in useful.'

'All right,' I say. 'Should I log what happened tonight?'

'Yes, might as well.' Pat stands up. 'And remember, next time it happens, ring me straight away. Me or Trevor or Doug. You've got all the numbers, have you? Office hours, emergency call-out?'

'Yes, thank you.'

Pat walks up to the mirror and touches its surface with the index finger of her right hand, exactly as she did with the glass of the framed painting in the kitchen. What an odd woman she is. Still, she's also the noise nuisance Terminator, so she can do no wrong as far as I'm concerned.

Once she's had enough of pressing my mirror with her fingertip, she turns to face me and stares past my right shoulder into mid-air, as if that's where I'm standing. 'People whine that there's no point ringing the council, they never do anything,'

she says. 'Nothing could be further from the truth. You watch – you'll see. We'll sort out your Mr Clay. I don't see it taking very long.'

I feel less reassured than I did a few seconds ago. Is she allowed to be so cocky? Doesn't the same council rule book that forbids eye contact in case a member of the public misinterprets it and falls in love with you also warn against promising people favourable outcomes that you can't possibly guarantee?

'I'm not allowed to tell you that officially.' Pat plays with the zip on her tracksuit top, pulling it up and down. 'Trevor wouldn't. Doug wouldn't. Never get their hopes up, that's what we're told, but I say if it goes our way, there's no harm in having started celebrating early, and if it doesn't go our way, well...'. She spreads her arms as if it's obvious. 'You're not going to feel any worse because you spent a few months hoping for the best, are you? I've yet to meet someone things have gone wrong for who wishes they'd started feeling miserable a damn sight sooner. Have you?'

'No. But...'

'Goodnight, Mrs Beeston. Louise, sorry.' Pat shakes my hand without looking at me. 'Get some

sleep. But fill in the log for tonight first, if you would. You'd be amazed how much detail a night's sleep can wipe out.'

I open the front door for her and she hurries away, bobbing from left to right as she goes.



I sit up, my eyes still glued together with sleep. My mind slumps forward inside my body: boneless grey mush that I must force into an upright position because something is happening and it's frightening, and I need to think about what it means.

Music. Different. Too close.

I open my eyes and feel as if I'm breaking them. Something's not right. I run my fingertips along the hollows beneath them. They don't feel hollow. They stick out: lumpy. It's as if they've been filled in with a thick substance that has swollen and started to rot. Perhaps it's just tiredness, or a build-up of angry tears I've held back. Moving my eyelids is like driving two sharp pins into the back of my skull.

What time is it? I could find out by reaching for my phone on the bedside table.

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The singing isn't coming from next door's basement this time. It can't be. This is sound that has travelled no distance. Children's voices. Boys.

Stuart snores beside me: a different rhythm from the music playing on the other side of the wall. That's where it must be coming from: Mr Fahrenheit's bedroom.

That's Joseph singing.

No.

The tune isn't one I've heard, but I know the words very well. It's the Opening Responses. Saviour College's chaplain and the boys' choir sing them at the beginning of every Choral Evensong.

O Lord, open thou our lips:
And our mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

O God, make speed to save us:
O Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Praise ye the Lord.

The Lord's name be praised.

There are many different musical settings for these words, just as there are for what Joseph calls the 'Mag' and the 'Nunc': the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis. Before Saviour College School kidnapped my son, he didn't know the street names of any liturgical pieces of music.

That's Joseph singing.

No. Impossible.

I can hear my son singing to me through the bedroom wall.

I am shaking. Trying very hard not to scream. I think I'm about to fail.



Noise Diary – Sunday 30 September, 5.25 a.m.

I have just put the phone down after having had the following conversation with Doug Minns from Cambridge City Council's environmental health team. What follows is pretty much word for word, I think.

THE ORPHAN CHOIR

Me: Hello, could I speak to Pat Jervis, please?

Him: Can I ask what it's in connection with?

Me: A noise problem. My name's Louise Beeston.
I live at 17 Weldon Road—

Him: Your details are in front of me. Mrs Louise
Beeston. Noise disturbance from a
neighbour at number 19. Loud music.

Me: Yes, that's right. If Pat's still on duty, I'd
really like her to come out to me again
and—

Him: You first rang this number to report a noise
nuisance at 1.45 a.m. Is that correct?

Me: I don't know. Yes, probably. It was around
that time. But since then—

Him: Is the noise still continuing at an
unacceptable level?

Me: If you'd listen to what I'm trying to tell you,

you might know the answer to that by now.
Will you please let me speak?

Him: I'm trying to establish the current situation,
Mrs Beeston. Is the noise nuisance ongoing?

Me: He's not making a noise now this second,
but he just woke me up, only about half an
hour after I'd fallen asleep. Deliberately. I'd
like Pat to come and—

Him: It's not possible for anybody to come out
to you if there's no noise being made at
present. First thing on Monday, I can send
a communication to your neighbour to the
effect that there's been a noise complaint
made against him. Also, if you could log—

Me: You don't understand. Yes, I'll log everything
and yes, please, send him a letter, but I
need someone to put the fear of God into
him now, tonight. Otherwise what's to stop
him waking me up again in another hour, even
assuming I could fall asleep? This is more
than noise nuisance – it's deliberate torture.

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Him: This is our only emergency line, Mrs Beeston. I'm on duty as the emergency officer. At present there's nobody in the office aside from myself. I can't stay on this line talking to you once I've established that you're not suffering an ongoing noise nuisance that needs urgent attention.

Me: If you'd bloody well listen to me, you'd find out that it *is* ongoing. He was playing music before, loudly – ask Trevor Chibnall. He heard it, when I rang him at 1.45. Then he stopped when—

Him: 'Ongoing' means that the music is playing now. Is it?

Me: No. I've said that. But—

Him: Then I'll have to ask you to ring again on Monday morning. I'm sorry, Mrs Beeston, but that's our policy.

Me: You are the least helpful human being I've ever had the misfortune to speak to. Goodbye.

So, as I hope the above script demonstrates, I was not allowed to explain the situation. I will attempt to do so here, where there is no danger of my clogging up an important phone line.

At 2 a.m., when I rang the council's out-of-hours noise number for the first time, my neighbour at number 19 Weldon Road, Justin Clay, was playing loud music which Trevor Chibnall heard. Mr Clay had been playing loud music continuously since shortly after 10 p.m. What I did not tell Trevor Chibnall was that at first he was playing pop and rock music as he always does, but that after I went round to complain and ask him to turn it down (during which conversation he accused me of being a music snob who only likes classical) he turned off the pop and put on loud classical music instead. I cannot see any way to read this apart from as a deliberate taunt.

Pat Jervis then came out to my house to assess the situation, but by the time she arrived the music had stopped. I worked out that she must have parked outside my house at the exact moment that Mr Clay turned off his music, and I believe he

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timed this deliberately, to make it look as if I had exaggerated, imagined or spitefully invented the problem.

After Pat Jervis left, I went to bed and took a while to fall asleep because I was so upset and agitated. I finally fell asleep and was then woken again at 4.20 a.m. by more music, again coming from Mr Clay's house, except that this time it wasn't coming from his basement but from his bedroom. Previously, he has always confined his musical activities to the basement. His bedroom is right next to mine (our two houses are mirror images of each other), separated only by an inadequately insulated Victorian wall, and he knows this. When he and I first met, shortly after my family and I moved in next door to him and before there was any problem between us, we looked round each other's houses at his instigation. I thought it was an odd thing for him to suggest, since we didn't know one another, but it soon became obvious that he wanted to show off his no-expense-spared interior. So I hope I've proved that he knows very well where his bedroom is in relation to mine.

The music he was playing in his bedroom was choral music. Specifically, it was a boys' choir, singing liturgical responses of the exact sort that my son sings every Tuesday and Thursday evening at Choral Evensong in Saviour College's chapel: another deliberate taunt. Mr Clay played the responses over and over again – I don't know exactly how many times because I became too upset to count. How loud was it? I suppose these things are relative. My husband, woken by my distress rather than the music, said that it was barely audible. Yet it was loud enough to wake me.

I believe that Mr Clay waited until he saw Pat Jervis leave my house, allowed me just enough time to calm down and fall asleep, and then deliberately woke me up, using a piece of music that he'd specially selected in order to provoke me. What has happened to me tonight is far more serious than a simple noise nuisance. It started as that, but has turned into something vicious and menacing that an unimaginative man like Doug Minns has no predetermined procedure for. Although there is currently no music spilling from my neighbour's house into mine, the problem is

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ongoing in the sense that there is basically zero chance of me getting any more sleep tonight. I'm too scared of being woken again, which is precisely the effect Mr Clay must have wanted to achieve. Given his malicious and calculating track record, he might well decide to turn the music back on in another half-hour, and if he doesn't it will be because he knows he doesn't need to – he knows he's instilled enough fear and dread in me that I won't risk closing my eyes. So, yes, the problem is very much ongoing, because I'm terrified that he will do this again – maybe not every night but as often as he feels like it. He can do it any time he wants, and stop whenever he sees a council officer's car pull up outside my house, so that no one ever hears or witnesses anything. And he knows I know that.

Look, I'm not a fool. I get it. Obviously emergency out-of-hours noise officers can't waste their time rushing to houses where once, long ago, there was a noise somewhere in the vicinity – that would be ludicrous. I understand why you lot have the rules you have, but would it kill you to be a bit flexible? Actually, I'm sure if Pat Jervis had picked

up the phone instead of Doug Minns, the response would have been quite different. Pat seems to be properly on my side. I'm sure she'd have bent the stupid rules, come round, knocked on my neighbour's door and told him in no uncertain terms, 'Cut it out right now, or you could end up in court. This is harassment.'

Maybe I ought to try the police again and tell them that the council's environmental health department has no interest in preventing a gruesome murder on Weldon Road. That would get their attention.