

# STRANGE

Short stories

by K. White

These stories are completely fictitious and all the characters in them are fictitious.

## 1. The House on the Beach

Sandra walks along the beach. It is five in the morning, the sun is only just beginning to rise. How she loves this time of day! It's difficult to walk over the pebbles. Sandra is reminded of when she was young, holidaying with her parents. She remembers sandy beaches, buckets, spades and sunshine. Sandra stops and looks out to sea. It's quite cold, and she pulls her jacket round her closely, huddling up and thrusting her hands deep into her pockets. She shivers. Suddenly she hears someone behind her, she turns sharply, but there's no one there. Of course not. How could there be? But still she has that feeling that someone is watching her. She walks on. She remembers standing at this very spot, ten years ago, early in the morning. Then, as now, she thought she heard someone behind her. But ten years ago her feeling was right; there was someone there. Well, a dog anyway. And then, following close behind, a man. She can almost see him now, looking apologetic for frightening her. Sorry, he had said, I didn't mean to alarm you, it's Ruffles, he always runs up to strangers - and then he added - but I'm surprised you didn't hear him.

- I was miles away, she said. She had felt quite safe, then.

- He just wants you to make a fuss of him, he said.

That's how it had started. Like a page out of a Mills & Boon novel. She shuts her eyes. If she thinks hard enough, she can almost feel the little Yorkshire terrier, looking up at her, panting. Wagging his tail, trust in his eyes. She has the strange sensation that James is on the beach with her. Sandra hesitates, she must stop herself thinking

this way; it brings everything back. She had met the only man she had ever loved, at 5 in the morning on a deserted, pebbly beach. Sandra walks faster; she doesn't really want to think of those times, but then what does she expect, coming back to the same beach, the exact same spot. It was bound to set off all those feelings, those emotions. Nine years they had together; it wasn't long enough. Oh, James, she thinks to herself, why did you have to leave me?

She walks to the harbour. There are fishing boats beginning to leave, and a row of men (and one woman) sitting on the edge, silent. Occasionally, one of them seems to have caught something. Sandra doesn't watch, she doesn't like to see the fish caught. It's true that they put the fish back, but it all seems so pointless. Fishing. Fishers of men. Why did I think of that...perhaps I shouldn't have come back here? For a moment she forgets why she is here, she's lost in her memories. She walks back, along the road this time. Nothing stirs, no one's awake yet. She passes the new estate, and the pub, and walks along the river to the bridge. She picks up some stones, and throws them down. They make a satisfying noise as they hit the water. This is what she and James did, when they walked Ruffles early in the morning. As Sandra looks out, she can see the town beginning to come alive. A few boats are travelling along the river. Some houses have their lights on, and a few people are out with their dogs. She looks down. She remembers when she had thought of leaving this life, to be with James. But then she had thought: he will always be with me now; he is with me. No one else can take him, he will never grow old, and I don't have to worry about him anymore. She had thought strange things then; she had not been well. She couldn't come to terms with his death, an accident, it didn't make sense. How can someone say goodbye one morning, drive to work, and then, just because they are in the wrong place at

the wrong time.....and suddenly, they're gone. End. Wiped out, as if they had never been. Seconds earlier, or seconds later, James would not have been in that particular spot. Or, if he had been driving in the inside or middle lane, someone else would be dead instead of him. Why him? Why then? It is all very puzzling. Sandra realises she is in danger of crying, perhaps jumping off the bridge, doing something silly. "I hope you don't do anything silly" they used to say.

I must think of something else, Sandra tells herself. I must get myself out of this mood, I must lift myself up, nothing's changed, everything's as it should be. Her therapist taught her to say this. She takes deep breaths, calming herself. She decides to walk back to the beach. Everything seems slightly unreal, she wonders if she's getting a migraine. She feels slightly giddy, and is aware of the smells around her, the smell of water, fish, the sun. The colours are too bright, and it's getting warm. She walks past the shops and flats, and along the path by one of the large houses which stand on the beach. She walks carefully along the pebbles, past the houses which overlook the sea. In fact, so deep is she in her own inner world, she doesn't even notice the houses. After a while she stops again, and sits down. She sits there a long time. It's becoming very warm now, and there are several people out in their gardens, and on the beach. Suddenly she hears her name being called. She looks round, and sees her mother and father approaching. For a moment she wonders if she's really here in Shoreham; she's confused, she can't think. Why are her parents here? She gets up and begins to walk towards them, no, run towards them, she's running faster faster and she flings herself into her mother's arms, and cries. Her mother holds her, strokes her hair.

- What's wrong, love -she says - what's the matter?

But Sandra stays silent.

- Didn't you expect us? - asks her father - we said 9 o'clock didn't we?

Sandra looks up -is it 9 o'clock already? - she says. She hadn't realised how long she'd spent walking up and down the beach and round the village. It seemed that being here again had affected her so much, it was as if something had wrenched her from reality, and moved her into a parallel world. Standing here, it was as if she'd been walking round in a dream, and she feels as if she's awake for the first time this morning.

- You really look as if you're not with us at all Sandra - her father says  
- I hope you haven't forgotten.

- Of course not - she says - it's just.....

- Yes - says her mother - we understand, it must be hard, coming back after all these years.

- So many memories -says Sandra

- They can be good ones - her mother says - at least now you accept his death. That's a big step forward.

Her father changes the subject, quickly -it's 10 past now - he says - let's knock.

So they walk up the path to the nearest house, and ring the bell.

The owners of the house apologise for the fact that there's no curtains at the windows - we've washed them you see - says the woman - we're actually moving out tomorrow.

Sandra and her parents walk around. Everything seemed so dark this morning, Sandra thinks, but now it's different.

- This is the main room - the woman says - we spend a lot of time here, looking out to the sea.

- It's lovely - says Sandra's mother, and the woman leads the way, upstairs.

Sandra hangs back.

- I know I'll be happy mum, says Sandra.

- I'm so glad - says her mother, as she walks upstairs - come on Sandra!

But Sandra stays in the lounge, looking out at the sea.

- We'll love it here - she says - we'll be really happy, won't we James?

Her mother hears her, and calls - did you say something Sandra?

- No - she answers -nothing mum.

The end

## 2. Our father?

Cathy is walking in the fields, thinking. This is something which Cathy does a lot now. She thinks back over the past seven years. For six long years she was ill, really ill. Even now, it's hard to explain to anyone how awful she felt. Racked with pain, fighting the fatigue and the slide into depression resulting from the medical profession's inability to diagnose or treat her she, who had never believed in God, prayed. Cathy felt silly at first, she had a shrewd idea she was talking to herself. A lifelong atheist, she certainly didn't tell anyone she was doing it. It was a secret which had to be kept hidden, from the few people she saw during those years.

Cathy thinks back to the last year of her illness, when the disease had worn her down so much, she eventually couldn't walk unaided. She remembers now the stress, the anxiety, the terror that she would lose her job, her house, her car, everything she had worked for. These things were important to her. She was going to be someone, she was going to make a lot of money, people would remember her. Cathy remembers looking out of the window, on the few days she was able to get up. She hoped this would cheer her up, but it made her feel worse. People were out there, people who were healthy, walking, talking, laughing. Every car parked outside was a promise of a journey which she would not be able to make, every laugh and shout was a reminder of a different life, a life she thought she would never have. Cathy, who had been sociable and happy, after six long years, was introverted, depressed and was convinced she was going to die. Cathy knew that all atheists pray to God when they are dying. Cathy was disappointed to find she was just like everyone else, but these feelings, like all the other feelings, were transitory, the

enormity of her feelings of illness, of the unfairness of it, of the unfulfilment of her dreams, overwhelmed her and pushed out the other feelings.

Cathy wasn't very successful at prayer. She had no idea how to go about it. She started: "our father...". She could hardly remember the prayer. She usually said, please, if you're there God, make me well. Then she resisted the temptation to bargain, make me well God, and I'll be good from now on.....she knew that's what people did, and apparently God doesn't like bargaining. She had no idea of what God was like, her vision of him was vague, she had never really thought much about God, since she was 16. When she tried to think of him, it was hard not to think of an old man with a beard, living somewhere unspecified. The sky probably.

Cathy finds thinking of this time of her life, there's too much pain. The pictures of how she was, what she was thinking, the awfulness of it, is too much to bear. Cathy plays the events in her mind, as if they were on DVD: cut to a year ago. Cathy is now cured - eventually they did find out what was wrong with her, they've cut out her womb, her ovaries, and bits of other organs too, and cut all the diseased bits of tissue out. There is nothing left to go wrong later, they tell her. The only trouble is, six years of the wrong medications, steroids, hormonal treatments, and triple doses of the strongest painkillers have left her with all sorts of medical problems. The doctors tell her she has a good ten years left. Ten years used to seem a lifetime, when she was ten. Now she is 40, it doesn't look as if she is going to collect her pension.

Cathy thinks of the time when she finally walked round the park, unaided. She walked for five minutes. She felt amazing. Now she can walk five miles, but then, it was a miracle. Cathy was so



absorbed in herself then, though, she didn't notice anything but herself; the birds, the trees, everything else was the background, everything else was less important. That's how old people get, she thought, and I am like that.

After she is cured (physically at least) Cathy thinks she should try to pray. After all, God might be there, what has she got to lose. She remembers reading about someone who prayed by asking God how to pray. This is a starting point, so one night, she prays. She simply asks God, whom she doesn't really believe in, to help her to pray. She tells God she isn't sure s/he is there, so asks for help. No bargaining. She is well now, so she feels better about praying.

In the middle of the night Cathy is woken by a sudden noise, a flash of light, the room lights up. Cathy at first thinks it is lightning, but it is still outside. Cathy is aware that she is in the presence of God; a voice says "it will help you to know I am female" Cathy answers: "You mean you are a woman?". "No, says, God, it is not the same thing". And then God is gone. Cathy knows God has spoken to her and this was the answer to her prayer. But she can't tell anyone, they would laugh, they would tell her it was a dream, they would think she had gone mad. Cathy feels a warm glow, she feels enfolded in something, she feels like she has been made anew. Cathy can't sleep now, so she goes downstairs and out into the garden, she looks up into the sky. There should be stars there, but all she can see is the orange glow from the London streetlights. She goes back to bed, but the noise from the planes and the traffic makes it difficult to sleep.

The next morning, she realises she is changed, changed forever. For now when she prays, she knows how to do it, now when she prays,

she knows who she is praying to. She can't explain it, and she doesn't need to.

For so long Cathy's life has been defined by her illnesses. Cathy remembers walking in the park, after God had spoken to her. She remembers thinking: Everything is the same, yet everything is so different. The colours are suddenly brighter, she can't work out why she hasn't noticed the beauty of the flowers, everything is so wonderful. She is amazed at the birds, the trees, the gardens, even people. In fact, it is so miraculous she feels like crying. Nothing really matters, except to live, just to be alive, and to be aware of the presence of God. But she doesn't tell anyone this, because she cannot.

Cathy brings herself back to the present. She has almost arrived back at her small caravan, parked a few minutes' walk from her brother's cottage. She can see Kenneth, rounding up the sheep with his new dog, Tess. She must get him to give her a lift into Taunton tomorrow, to collect her jobseekers allowance. Also, she will go to the church jumble sale, it will soon be autumn, she needs some warm winter clothes. It's cold at night, looking at the stars.

The End

### 3. Tangled Webs

Pauline has told her husband Bill that she is going to the seaside with some friends. She has the day off. She is not meeting her friends though, she will be travelling alone. However, once she arrives she will meet her lover, Michael. Michael is also married. It is a lovely day, hot and sunny, just as Pauline likes it. She's intending laying on the beach, eating, drinking, smoking, maybe even swimming, with Michael. Normally she has only snatched moments with him, in Petts Wood, which has become their special place. Except that the last time they met there, Pauline had an uneasy feeling, as if they were being watched. Pauline thought perhaps it was Bill, perhaps he had become suspicious and was following her. But in the end they had decided it was nothing, they were imagining it. Pauline and Michael haven't met there lately just in case. Bill has a terrible temper, both she and Michael have reason to be scared. They meet at coffee time, in Food for Friends. They gaze at each other over the tables. They walk entwined in each other, along the lanes. This is what lovers do, even men and women in their forties, when they should know better. They stop to kiss, every so often. It occurs to Pauline that they might look faintly ridiculous, and it occurs to Michael too, but they don't mention this to each other. They eat ice creams, laugh, and run along the beach. Pauline forgets about Bill, for the afternoon, and for Michael, his wife Sheila does not, at that moment, exist for him.

But of course Sheila does exist. She is, at this moment, sitting in their living room, listening to the radio, mending Patrick's school blazer. She doesn't really think it worthwhile, just for a few weeks more; once he moves into year 9 he'll need a new one. If he had gone to the local comprehensive of course, he wouldn't need all these different blazers, ties, caps and so on. They seem to wear anything

at the comprehensive. But since she is grateful that Patrick goes to St. Bartholomews, she mends the blazer, quite content, blissfully unaware of the activities of her husband. She lives in a large house, is reasonably well off, and has good neighbours. Her children are polite and well behaved, even though Patrick answers her back occasionally. Both he and Sarah, three years older, hardly ever fight. She feels secure in her marriage, her children, her life. She looks at her watch; Patrick should be home soon from school.

This day though, Patrick is not at school. He is at this moment in Petts Wood. Patrick has missed afternoon school, he is looking for his father. He has a hunch that his father is having an affair with someone. A few weeks ago, when he was in the woods with his friend Mark, he thought he saw his father, by the clearing, with a woman he thinks he recognises. They were standing by the big tree. Patrick tries not to remember the picture he has of his father and the woman, wrapped around him, kissing him. Later he began to wonder whether he had imagined it, or whether it was a man who looked like him. He had not really been certain, because he didn't want Mark to see, and anyway, they had to get back soon, he wasn't actually allowed in the woods, and neither was Mark. And it couldn't have been his father, could it, in the afternoon? - he would still be at work. Patrick has been in the woods several times since then, but he has never seen the couple again. But last night, Patrick heard him talking on the phone, in hushed tones, when his mother was at her pottery class. Patrick was supposed to be doing his homework, in his room, not lying on the floor with his ear pressed to the bare floorboard by the cupboard. He heard his father making some sort of arrangements for today. It was hard to hear, but it was for this afternoon. Patrick guesses he is meeting someone, and deduces he is meeting a woman in the woods. That would make sense. Patrick

is alone, he doesn't want his friends to know that his father is seeing someone else, they might tease him, he would feel embarrassed, they might start talking about his parents in a way which would make him feel ashamed.

Patrick is suddenly aware of a movement in the bushes. At last! Patrick's heart beats faster, he looks over towards the clearing. At first he thinks it is his father in his weekend clothes, but this is only because he is expecting to see him. The man is standing by the tree with his back to Patrick, he has jeans on and a white tee; this is how his father often dresses when he's not at work. But there is no woman there, and Patrick shouts "Hey!". The figure turns around, but it is not his father, this is someone younger, and slimmer. Patrick is about to say "sorry, I thought you were my father", when the man, a shock of blond hair falling over his face, smiles at Patrick and says hello quite pleasantly, at the same time his hands have undone the buttons on his jeans, and Patrick stands rooted to the spot, staring as the man has taken his prick out, it is huge and erect, the man's hands are holding it at the base, and he is still smiling. Patrick trembles, he doesn't know how to react, what to do, whether to run. He has visions of the man catching him, running after him. Patrick is aware that he probably looks shocked, the man is waiting for something to happen. The man takes a step forward and says "come on, touch it, it won't hurt you" and the spell is broken, Patrick runs, runs, runs, runs for his life, crying, trembling, he's scared, he's running home, he's never going to the woods again.

Patrick rushes through his front door, screaming and crying, he is hysterical, his grandfather Jack and Sheila rush to him hug him and try to discover why he is so distraught, but all that comes out of him are odd words and disconnected sentences. Something about the woods and a man; Jack realises immediately what has happened.

- a man exposed himself to you? asks Jack, gently. Patrick nods, still crying.

- did he do anything else? Patrick shakes his head.

- are you sure? asks his mother.

- no, I mean yes, he didn't. Patrick gulps down big gulps of air.

- he frightened you, is that it? asks Jack - he frightened you, but he didn't do anything.

- he asked me to - says Patrick, calming down, thinking they will think he is making a big fuss about nothing. - I ran away.

- you did the right thing - says his mother - we must report this to the Police.

- No -says Patrick - I'm all right.

- It's the shock - says Jack.

- You're sure that was all - asks Sheila

- Yes, but I was frightened.

- Of course you were - says Jack -you weren't to know what he might do. Make him a tea, Jack says to Sheila. A good strong one, with sugar in it. And why were you in the woods anyway?

At that moment Michael comes in; he is in his work clothes, he is tired. Michael is on a high, he has had a lovely day, he is happy, he is looking forward to one of Sheila's meals, usually when he gets in he tells Jack and Sheila what he's been doing at work, Patrick tells him about school, and he watches some TV. But tonight there is no meal on the table, Sheila is looking worried and concerned, and Jack is on the sofa talking to Patrick.

- What is it? asks Michael.

- It's Patrick. Some man exposed himself to him in the woods. It's had a bad effect on him.

- Did he do anything? asks Michael.

- No, -says Patrick.

Michael is so relieved, but at the same time angry. He has told Patrick time and time again not to go into the woods.

- For God's sake Patrick - Michael shouts - I've told you again and again, you are NOT to go into the woods. What's the matter with you? Don't you listen to anything. You're just a young boy, there are perverts out there, we've told you.....

Patrick, who is sobbing anyway, sobs even more. He is finding it hard to breathe, his eyes are filling up with tears, and he's hungry at the same time. -I...I...- he tries to speak but can't.

-Bloody hell, what do you expect, walking through there on your own - continues Michael.

Patrick feels all this is very unfair. He only wanted to see his father, it was his fault, if his father hadn't been in the woods that time, he wouldn't have needed to go back there. He conveniently forgets that he wasn't supposed to be in there in the first place. His father is still going on at him, shouting, and now he is shaking Patrick, to make him answer. Patrick can't stand it anymore.

-To find you! I went in to find YOU!! he shouts.

There's a silence. An atmosphere. His dad says - Me? why would you go there to find me?

Patrick is hysterical. He is crying, sobbing, not only because of the man, but because his dad is frightening him too.

- because I thought YOU were there. There, in the woods. Patrick knows he is shouting, but he can't stop- with that woman. You and Her. by the tree. Because -says Patrick- Because. You know. Patrick feels guilty now. He shouldn't have said anything. Then Patrick starts to sob again, partially to stop them from questioning him anymore, and partly because he can't stop the vision of the man in front of him, even when he shuts his eyes. Patrick is suddenly aware that no one is saying anything. His mother looks at his father, but says to Patrick

- what woman?

- Mrs. Gates from the Tennis Club.

Patrick looks at his mother and father, and he doesn't fully understand the looks they give each other. Then his grandfather says - come on young Patrick, let's go outside and work on our rabbit hutch, and forget about the horrible man. I expect your dad will ring the Police, won't you son?

Patrick goes out to the garden with his grandfather

- will it be all right, grandpa? asks Patrick.

- of course it will. Your mum and dad'll sort it out, you'll see. Don't worry.

-OK says Patrick

Later that night, his father kisses him goodnight

- are you and mum all right? asks Patrick

- of course.



- why were you with Mrs Gates? asks Patrick, bravely. He feels he can ask this now.

- Never mind that -says his father - it's all sorted out. It's all in the past. The police will be here to get a description of the man tomorrow. You just go to sleep now.

Patrick sleeps. He dreams of the man with blond hair; it's a confused dream. He sees the man smiling at him. As he wakes, he realises he is sweating, his heart is beating faster, and the bed is sticky.

Four years later.....

It's a lovely summer's day. Michael has the day off. He has told Sheila he is going shopping in Bromley, for birthday presents. This is true. What he hasn't told Sheila, is that he is meeting Margaret: he will go shopping, he isn't telling lies. He has told Sheila he will have some lunch in Bromley; this is true also. Margaret is divorced, so no husband to worry about there. This time, Michael is careful; Sheila will never find out.

Sheila is sitting in the living room, listening to the radio. She likes listening to the "problem hour". Most of the people ringing in seem to have husbands or wives who are having affairs. Sheila is letting down the hem of Patrick's school trousers, yet again. He is now one of the tallest boys in class. . Funny to think that Patrick's unfortunate incident in the woods had led to her suspicions about Michael being confirmed. They went through a really difficult time, but Sheila and Michael are now OK. Sheila hasn't found anything to suggest he has been unfaithful since that time. No phone calls where someone hangs up, no unusual letters, no notes in his jacket pockets, no late nights unaccounted for. And no strange texts or

emails - Sheila knows she is invading Michael's privacy, but she only feels a tiny bit of guilt. Perhaps, in time, she won't need to check, and she will forget entirely. And Patrick seems a well adjusted, happy lad, even though he is rather quiet and introverted. But he had always been a bit shy, totally different from Michael, more like me, she thinks. Or maybe more like Jack.

Jack is in the garden, dismantling the rabbit hutches; since the last rabbit died, Patrick hasn't wanted any more. Jack is quite happy, as usual. He is looking forward to going to Patrick's prize day. Patrick has won several prizes, and Jack is very proud of him.

Patrick is, at this moment, walking through the woods, towards the clearing. His school uniform is folded up neatly in his sports bag. Before he left school, he changed into his jeans and white tee. Patrick often comes to the woods, although he has never seen the blond man again, although he has sometimes dreamt of him.

As he walks along towards the clearing, two schoolgirls with their rucksacks slung over their backs walk pass him, giggling. They look back at him, to see if he is taking notice of them, but Patrick ignores them; he pretends to be looking somewhere else. After a while, Patrick is again alone. Patrick leans against the big tree. An hour passes. It is hot. Patrick leans down to get a diet coke out of his bag. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a young boy from the comprehensive; he can tell because of the uniform. The boy must be in year 7, he is quite small, and has glasses, which he has taken off, and is wiping on his shirt. He is oblivious to Patrick, he appears to be looking for something. Then he looks up, puts on his glasses, and notices Patrick. Patrick leaves his drink, walks quickly towards him, smiles, and at the same time, his hands unbutton his trousers.

The End

#### 4. A kind of love

Me 'n Henry've been together for fifteen years now, that's longer than Ted and me were married! I was glad when he left; I was getting right fed up of him - cleaning and cooking for him, hardly a word of appreciation. And he kept on at me to lose weight, to dress young, like. It was hard for me though. After the dry-cleaning place closed down, I got a job in the bakers, that's when I started piling the weight on. I couldn't resist the leftover buns and doughnuts, especially the ones filled with jam and real cream. Some of the girls there had just started jogging, to lose a few pounds. I had a mind to go too. I remember I asked Ted to go with me, but he just laughed, and said it wasn't for the likes of us, and there was nothing wrong with his weight. Then he went and left me for a woman half his age and as thin as a rake, so that should've kept him happy anyway. As soon as he'd gone I cleaned up after him for the last time. I got rid of the smell of stale cigarette ash and old beer and I thought: Never Again. From now on I'll do exactly what I want when I want. No pleasing anyone but myself. But things don't always turn out like you expect do they? After a while, I wanted a bit of company; I got lonely sometimes, especially at night.

Then I met Henry. It was companionship I wanted. It was difficult at first though. I hadn't reckoned on the snoring. One good thing about Ted, probably the only good think come to think of it, is Ted never snored. At first I couldn't sleep through Henry's noise. Waking him up with a shove stopped him, but only for a while. I got used to it though, in the end. Now I tend to wake up if I don't hear it!

No, it definitely took a bit of getting used to. Henry likes getting up early - he's at his best in the mornings. Me 'n Ted, well, we had late

nights and on a weekend we'd lie in, sometimes till midday. Well, Henry wasn't having any of that. He insisted I got up early and carried on at me till I did. I tried saying no but in the end of course I gave in. I made all the adjustments.

A big point in Henry's favour though, was that my mum really liked him. She'd never been that keen on Ted, they used to have really bad arguments. Henry loves mum too. We've had several holidays over the years, the three of us. We don't do that now, Henry doesn't travel so well these days, and mum's getting on a bit. But Henry and mum still go down to the local together every Sunday lunchtime while I make a late lunch. She always used to go to the pub with Dad, but after he died she had no one to go with. Funny, she knows everyone down there, but she still doesn't like to go in on her own. Well, she's got Henry now. He always has lager, and she has a tot of whiskey. It's the only time Henry drinks alcohol.

Another thing about Henry, is that he never minded going jogging with me. In fact, he was keen on it himself. We just went round the park usually. I didn't want to go on my own, I had a feeling I probably looked silly, a woman of my size huffing and puffing round the park. But I knew nobody would shout remarks at me when Henry was there, well, nobody but Ted that is. Linda at work, she said the remarks she used to get from men when she was on her own, I wouldn't like to repeat them. One of the last times we went jogging, years ago now of course - we saw Ted and his woman, out walking. Both of them had cigarettes hanging out of their mouths, and they were all wrapped round each other trying to act like teenagers - well, she was just out of her teens herself wasn't she, but there was no excuse for him. Disgusting. I hoped they hadn't seen us, but no such luck. They were both laughing and Ted shouted out, loud enough that everybody around could hear: "Hasn't done much

for your weight, has it?" Shouting like a fishwife, he never did have much class. Anyway, that started them off on a fresh outburst of giggles. It really embarrassed me that did, but we just ignored them, its best that way. Henry could've run a lot faster than me of course - he was leaner and fitter for one. I was, and still am, overweight, and in my younger days I smoked. But we ran together, Henry never seemed to mind jogging at my slow pace. We don't go jogging now; we gave that up, as I said. Henry's got a bit arthritic, and my back plays me up every now and then. But I've always believed in exercise, so every evening me 'n Henry go for a brisk walk, come rain or shine. We've never missed a day.

I've had a quiet life since Ted walked out, thank goodness. Henry's just right for me; I'm happy with him. He's getting on a bit now of course, but we all are aren't we? He likes pottering around in the garden mostly. I can't call him in for dinner, like I used to, because he's got a bit deaf now too. So I have to wave my arms about to attract his attention; we get by quite well on sign language.

His other favourite activity, if you can call it that, is having an afternoon nap in his favourite armchair. Often, I'll come in, and he'll be dozing there, he won't even have heard me come in. But eventually he notices me of course, and then, although he's a bit on the arthritic side as I've said, he leaps off his chair, rushes towards me and wags his tail so hard, his whole backside wags back and forth, just like it did when I first set eyes upon him fifteen years ago, in the pet shop. No doubt about it, Henry's worth any number of men like Ted.

The End

## 5. Strange

Matt took a last look in the full-length mirror which was propped up next to the door of his dingy bedsit. He had just come back from a long vacation in Tunisia; it was hard to believe he didn't have to go back to College now the new term had started. It had been his life for so long. But at least now he would be able to get a decent job and move out of this place. With a first class degree he would be able to do anything. Physics would be a subject which would get him a brilliant job, he was glad he'd chosen it instead of psychology, which his brother had done.

Matt picked up his car keys. He thought: it's always me who does the driving. Of course it's always the one who doesn't drink, but I would drink more and have a good time if I could. People take advantage of me, he thought. Matt didn't like drinking and driving, he couldn't bear the thought of losing his licence; it looked good to have a full driving licence, for your C.V, and anyway, you couldn't rely on public transport. Who wants to travel with all those people anyway, people who dressed badly, who read the Sun and thought physics was about apples falling on someone's head. Matt reflected that he would much rather be on his own. He didn't have many friends, and those he had he could probably do without if he had to. People were just one big problem. Matt decided he was getting into one of his depressed moods, so he purposely thought of something else. His brother taught him to do this - cognitive distraction he called it. Psychology might be useful, sometimes. Matt started fantasising about all the money he was going to earn, all the places he could see, and all the things he could buy. He loved clothes and fast cars, not that he wanted to go fast. He just wanted a car which people knew could go fast. Matt started to feel more positive. Things would get better from now. Matt closed the door to his

bedsit, and walked downstairs to the front door. The hall was cluttered with unopened envelopes to god-knows-who, and the downstairs woman had been spraying air freshener everywhere, which mingled with the smell of vomit and dogs. Matt was glad to be leaving, soon he wouldn't have to lie about where he lived; soon he really would live somewhere decent.

Matt stopped at the Halls to pick up Craig, who was with Lisa in her room. Matt didn't particularly like Lisa, and was glad when Craig said she wouldn't be coming to the party. On the way to Beckenham, they stopped off at the Rosemary Branch to have a few beers. Well, Craig did; Matt only drunk two lagers.

By the time they arrived, having got lost round the one-way system because Craig was too drunk to navigate, it was quite late. Matt knew which house it was because of the noise emanating from it. Rap stuff. Oh God. Sometimes Matt felt really old, even though he was only 22. Why couldn't they play something decent? It was, of course, worse in the house. The place was jammed pack full of students. Matt felt quite out of place at first. Then he came across a group of people that he slightly knew, and so he felt easier. "Here's Matt" said one "What are you doing here?" Before Matt could answer, one said "don't drink, don't smoke, don't do anything" and the others laughed, but they weren't being nasty, thought Matt, they were only teasing him. "Do some things" Matt mumbled into his glass. They said something back, but Matt couldn't hear above the noise; he had to go into the kitchen where it might be quieter, and there might be food. His sister's friend Simon was there. Matt recalled that Simon had studied Anthropology, and so they exchanged news for a while. Craig was nowhere to be seen. "You don't have to drive back" Simon said "you can stay here - loads of people are staying. As long as you don't mind dossing on the floor;

it'll be fine" Craig appeared from the garden "I'm not leaving anyway" he said as he passed "its one o'clock already, and we've only just go here". Matt thought about it. He was probably already over the limit, he was tired and hungry, and what was so attractive about going back to his bedsit? Nothing. "OK thanks" Matt said, hastily eating a handful of peanuts. "That's great". The noise didn't seem so bad now, he was out of range of the flashing lights which gave him headache, and the food helped. Particularly nice was the mushroom quiche. The food was pretty good for a student party. Not that there was much vegetarian food. Matt tucked into the quiche. All the food was labelled with strange names. The quiche was labelled "magic moments". Matt saw that Stewart and his crowd were looking at him, perhaps laughing at him. Matt didn't like to feel paranoid; it was probably only his imagination. But yes, they were staring at him, making him feel uncomfortable. Matt was usually quite timid, but the drink had made him feel a bit bolder. He strode up to them and said angrily - "What's so funny?"

-you. you are.

And Matt was treated to another outburst of laughing and giggling. They must be drunk, Matt thought. He felt annoyed, annoyed that he was not in on the joke - as usual. It was always the same, others got sillier while he got ever more sober. But this time, he reflected, I've had quite a lot to drink. I should feel part of this, I should feel like them, but I still don't. The feeling of alienation that he had always had, even when he was a little boy, swept over him and brought back his feelings of depression.

- come on Matt, buck up, said someone.

-Were not laughing at you - were laughing with you.



- at least, added another - we would be if you were laughing. Don't worry, you'll be laughing soon.

Matt looked straight at them: "What do you mean? What's going on?"

- Nothing, come on Matt, let's get going".

"Going where?" Matt asked, puzzled. They probably think I'm a right dork, thought Matt, I sound like an idiot.

"To the country" Simon answered.

"We're all going for a trip" Stewart laughed. "a trip to the country", and the others joined in the laughter.

Matt felt odd. Perhaps he was having one of his migraines. Although he didn't actually have a headache, he felt strange and his head felt as if it didn't really belong to him. He was used to people having a joke at his expense. But now they didn't seem to be particularly laughing at him, they were, as they had said, laughing with him.

Matt laughed, which resulted in even more laughter from the others. Someone was telling a very funny joke, about a prisoner telling jokes. It was really very very funny. Matt couldn't remember a time when he had enjoyed himself so much, he was really glad he came to the party.

Matt followed Stewart outside. He was surprised to see it was dawn, it was very beautiful outside. He was amazed at the brightness of the sky, the clarity of the houses, and the colour of the pavement. It was beautiful. Beckenham must, he thought, be the most beautiful place in the country, New Cross was never like this. He felt the tree outside the house, the texture was incredible, he could feel the texture of the colour. And the leaves were an experience in themselves. Someone was asking for his car keys. They must be

joking, Matt thought, I'm not letting anyone drive my car, my beautiful car. How beautiful the word beautiful is, I wonder if they invented the word because it sounds like it is. That isn't right. That didn't make sense. But that OK, because the world doesn't make sense, Matt thought. Then someone called John said "Of course it doesn't Matt old pal". Matt wasn't quite sure whether he had spoken out loud or whether John could read his mind. Perhaps John could read minds. Matt tried to send John a thought, but John didn't answer.

Matt couldn't remember getting in the car. It's confusing, Matt thought, why can't I remember what I did a minute ago? But I can remember what I did when I was two, when I was three. But I'm an adult now, driving a car. I couldn't drive a car when I was two. When I was two, it wouldn't have started. The car started now though. Matt thought, my car is purring happily along the Beckenham streets. This is the most fantastic day of my life.

Matt drove through the countryside. He could hardly believe the colours in the sky, blues, reds, yellows, the colours rained down on him, zapping at him like laser beams. It's like a firework show, he thought. Matt began to realise that he must have drunk too much. But drink doesn't do this to you, he thought. This is really weird, the car seems to be going so slowly. Matt looked at the others in the car, they were all asleep by the look of it, come to think of it he was tired too. If only he could sleep. He looked at the Speedo: 80miles an hour. But it can't be, it must be wrong I'm gliding along so slowly.

Suddenly: screaming, no stop, Matt, watch out, the words jumbled up, screeching at him, making his head hurt, it was a migraine, it must be a migraine, the colours, I can't stand it he thought. He put his hands over his ears, he was aware of the noise, he tried to shut it

out, the car wouldn't do what he wanted. All this screaming going on, enough to drive him mad. He felt sick. He wanted to be at home. He put the car in neutral, took his foot off the brake, and held his head in his hands.

Matt could hear the birds singing. And someone was talking to him. It was hard to make out what the voice was saying, but it sounded reassuring. Matt was so tired, it was dark, it must be time for bed, he had to sleep.

Matt was aware his father was talking to him: I must be dreaming, he thought. Dad's in New York, he's not here. Where am I? I must be dreaming, in my bedsit....But no, it's not right, it's too bright. Matt strained to remember.

His sister said "Don't try to talk, we're here now"

Matt tried to take that in. He couldn't understand why his sister was here either, she was in Dublin. Was there some family reunion he didn't know about?

"What son? What did you say?" His father was near him now, bending over him.

"Where am I?"

"You're all right now. You're with us, you're in a hospital".

"Don't talk Matt, just rest...."

Matt thought about it. He felt all right. Nothing hurt, except his headache was still there, in the background.

"I'm fine" he said, but he knew his voice was weak, and it was hard to move. No. No. I must be able to move. I can feel. He wiggled his toes. He was sure he could feel them moving. Matt breathed easy

again. But something was wrong. He opened his eyes. He could see. He could breathe.

"What's happened" said Matt "What's wrong with me"

Matt could feel rather than see the reaction of his family.

"Something's wrong" he said

"Matt" said his father "I'm so sorry" and with that, he burst into tears. Matt had never seen his father cry. He wanted to reach out to him.

Matt couldn't believe something could go so wrong. Why me? Why me? But like the pools, like the lottery like all unlikely events, someone has to be the one. It's just chance. One mistake. And life is over.

The End

## 6. Vicious circle

I just got back from taking Damon to school when I saw the letter on the mat. I really pissed me off. Every bloody month it's the same thing. I picked the letter off the mat and stormed off down the council offices. It's a long walk down Acre Lane, and really boring. Although it's the Clapham office, it's almost Brixton. I had to wait half hour to be seen, so I was really angry by the time that stuck up bitch behind the counter saw me.

- I pay my bloody rent EVERY month, on time, I told her - so why is it I'm always getting these letters. I'm never late. I've got enough to worry about without you telling me the payments are late.

- I'm sorry Mrs. Williams, the girl said - but this is the date the rent has to be paid by. You must be paying it in late. When you go online or you.....

- Cash, I said, its cash.

- Well then, cash you need to pay it in.....

She was going to repeat herself, I'm not stupid, I don't need to hear it twice. Especially from a kid just out of school. All made up, little tart. Just as I was going to start arguing, some other nosey bitch started. She was just waiting in the queue like me.

- Perhaps if I can explain, she said - you need to pay it in a few days before....

- What you nosing in for - I said - Bloody cheek! I'm not late, I says, you can what what you like, you're in the wrong, and I don't want any more letters. Get it? And I don't know why you're butting in! The girl behind the counter and the nosey one looked at each other. I saw that look. Both stuck up cows. I got out of there before I lost

my temper. At least I told them. I felt a bit less angry when I got out. It was drizzling and I didn't have an umbrella. By the time I got back to the flat it was pouring, and I was soaked. The lifts weren't working again. It's all right for the people on the first few floors, but six flights is too much for me. Yes, I know I should be able to do it, I'm not even 40 yet, but that's how it is. Maybe it is the smoking. The doctors told me enough. Every time I go to see her, whatever it's about, she says "give up smoking". Go about my cough, it's smoking, fair enough. But I could go there with a headache, and she'd say it's the smoking. Sod her. It's all right for doctors with loads of money, big houses and cars and whathaveyou. When I finally got upstairs and into the flat I made myself a cup of tea and lay on the sofa, exhausted. I put the TV on first though. After a while I thought I better tidy up the place, it looked a right mess. But it was a while before I got to doing it, then I couldn't be bothered. First I made myself some lunch, and watched Neighbours. I love Neighbours, it's my favourite program, although I like all the soaps. I was thinking how I used to watch Sons and Daughters and High Road. I was just thinking about them programs when there was a knock at the door. I didn't think, did I? Could be anyone. But it was him. I tried to shut the door but it was too late.

- Let me in, he says, come on.

-you are in, I says.

He walks in as though he owns the place.

- Kevin, I says, why are you here?

He ignores me though, and walks into the kitchen, opens the fridge, and gets out a can of beer.

- Kevin, you're not staying are you?

- Why, you got someone coming? He says

- Of course not - I says - but I've got things to do

- Oh yeh, he says. He takes his beer into the living room, and changes channels. He sits on the floor, back against the sofa.

- make us something to eat, he says

- No, I says

- Go on, he says - I'm starving.

I look at him. He's still good looking, slim, a good figure of a man. He's younger than me, by 5 years. His jeans are tight, and he's wearing a new shirt I never knew he had. When he looks at me like that, I can feel myself weakening.

- Just beans on toast then, I say. I stand there for a few moments, watching him. He smells of booze, and fags.

I throw him the packet, he lights up.

- What's the matter with your own place, I says.

- There's people in it, he says - I need a bit of peace and quiet.

- What people - I says - you're not letting Mick and Ty stay there are you? What's the point of the council giving you your own place if you can't use it? You're not shooting up are you,, not again Kevin!

- Course not - he says -what's into you? We're separated, remember, you got no hold on me so piss off to the kitchen, and get my fry up! Anyway, I've changed, I don't do that no more.

He switches the telly up. The people next door can probably hear it. They always used to complain when he lived here. For the past three months though, they haven't said a word But they will today. I make

bacon n' eggs. I wondered whether to ask about that job he said he was going for. But it would probably make him angry. I took his lunch into the living room, but he wasn't there. I could hear him in the bathroom. The bathrooms upstairs. It's like a proper house. It's only flats on the top floor that's got an upstairs. That's the only good thing about being so high up. Once you're up here and shut in, it's all right. Except you don't look out on gardens, you look out on the South Circular. Still I don't look out that much. Kev was so long upstairs, I wondered if he was shooting up. But when he came out, he looked normal.

- Take your lunch, I said.

-You bring it to me. H walked through into the living room.

-Switch that telly down - I said to him - next door'll be onto me.

-moan moan, he said

-Are you going to sit on a chair to eat this? I asked

-No I'll have it here. And another beer.

He put his plate on the floor, and waited for me to bring his beer. He drunk that down in a few mouthfuls. I sat on the edge of the armchair. It's part of a 3 piece suite. It's really old, but it looks good. Everything in here looks good really, when I get time to clean it, and I'm not too tired. Right now it looks shabby. But no one comes here anyway so it don't matter what it looks like really doesn't it?

- Miss me? Kevin asks

Actually I didn't but I couldn't tell him that. He'd only get angry. So I said -sometimes.

-Come here -he said - reaching out for me.



- No!

-Why not?

-I don't want to! - I said

-Yes you do, yes you bloody do.

-No Kevin, don't, it's over.

-It's never over, -he says, and lunges at me

-No! I scream

-Who's worrying about the neighbours now? he asks nastily, and switches the remote up so the telly's really loud.

- No Kevin! I says

-No, No, he says, you know you mean yes, yes.

-No don't Kevin, please

-say please - he says, twisting my arm behind my back

-please, I said

-Please what?

-Please let me..

-No - he says - that's not right. You say "please give it to me"

-Kevin

-Please, he says

-Please

-Please give it to me, he says

-Please give it to me, I repeat - please give it to me. Then I say - no, please Kevin, don't.

Please don't stop - he says, and by this time his other hand has pulled down my blouse getting it all out of shape and he's kiss me and biting me, he's hurting, and I was still sore from the last time, the bruises haven't healed yet.

-mmm, mmm, -Kevin's saying -nice....

-say nice - he says, but I stay silent.

-say nice, he says, and I don't say anything, then Wham! he hits me round the head, I feel dizzy.

-nice, I say, it's nice, and he's pulling my skirt up and he needs both hands so as he takes his hands from me, I try and get up but I shouldn't have. He catches me and turns me over so I'm on my stomach, and his hand is coming down really hard, slapping me, my legs, my arms, by bum. Then he starts punching and it's really hurting. He pulls my skirt right up and rips my pants down and I can hear his breathing getting heavier.

-You really like it - he says - you, slap, really, slap, love it, slap.

It's no use fighting but I can't stay still. I fight with all my strength but I'm no match for him, I'm closing my eyes but I can sense him undoing his flies and getting it out. I close my eyes and then next thing threes a searing pain through me, right up to my stomach, again and again and again. I hot and stick, I don't feel well, he rolls off.

-put your tits back, he says, and I do what he says.

He hands me the plate - this is cold, do me some more!

I go into the kitchen. It's happened again. Why am I so stupid? Why don't I even learn. The bastard. And I never even said nothing to annoy him. I don't know what I'm going to say to Mr Mitchell. Last time I saw him, he said

-Mrs Williams, we can't get an injunction against your husband if you keep letting him in, cooking him meals and.....and socialising with him.

- I didn't mean to let him in - I said - he sort of wheedled his way in. Mr Mitchell looked at me in that same way schoolteachers used to look at me when I was at school. But it was true - I was stuck down the bottom of the flats with a load of heavy shopping cos the lifts had broke, and Kevin turned up. He was really charming, he asked if he could carry my bags up, just like the old days. I said - no nonsense though - and he said

- of course not.

But of course there was. I always fell for it.

- and the meals? Mr. Mitchell had said.

- it was only beans on toast, I said.

And he sighed.

That was months ago.

Anyway, now I need to leave the flat, I can't stay here after what he's just done. I took him some more bacon n' eggs and I tried to get out the front door but it was locked.

- can I have the keys Kevin? I asked

- why, going somewhere?

-I have to do some shopping. Then pick Damon up.

- yeh, well, You don't have to go yet, he said

I went to the bathroom and cleaned up. I felt a bit better then. I made another cup of tea. He watched telly, I waited

-Kevin, I've got to go now, I said - please give me the keys

-Silly cow - he says - I never bloody locked the door. You're so stupid! And he laughed. Then I saw the keys were on the table and I opened the door which wasn't locked as he said, I cried all the way down to the school. I wanted my mum really. I never appreciated her when she was alive. She died early. The way I'm going, I'll be joining her soon.

I was at the school too early, I couldn't be bothered to do any shopping, my arms and legs ached too much. So instead of hanging round the school I went to the arcade and played the fruit machines and bought some instants, but I never won. I bought another packet of ciggies because I'd left mine at the flat. The time just flew by then, it's as if you're in another world. So I was late to the school. Mrs Parfitt told me off

- Please don't be late again - she said - Damon needs to know when you're arriving, he becomes distraught when you're not here. This is the second time this week..... and she went on and on and on.

-I couldn't help it, - I said -it wasn't my fault...

-We need to talk -she said - is everything all right at home?

-why? - I asked. I bet Damon has been saying things. - What's Damon been saying?

- Why nothing - she said. She did look surprised so perhaps he hadn't been telling tales.

-how come your asking then?

- He hasn't improved. He bites the other children. He fights. He screams, he won't share. It's not the behaviour we expect from a 6 year old.

-He doesn't behave like that at home, I said, annoyed - You should discipline him, you should be allowed to smack him. He'd soon behave if you disciplined him properly.

-You know the school doesn't allow that! She says

-Well then? What do you expect ? I said.

But it was no use. She just went on and on, talking about educational psychiatrists and tests and I was getting confused and I hurt, so I said

-Bloody hell, just leave it will you, and I grabbed Damon by his coat collar and dragged him out of there, and he began to scream

-Shut up! I shouted -bloody well shut up else I'll give you what for!

He grizzled and got on my nerves, on and on, so I whacked him round the head: Shut up I told you, otherwise you'll get it again, and I gave him another slap. He cried louder, he was really getting on my nerves now. I wanted to get the bus but I couldn't with his carrying on. He was lagging behind all the time. Everyone was look and people at the bus stop made tutting noises.

- For God's sake Damon - I shouted. Then I thought "chips, that'll do it". So I dragged him in the chip shop and bought two packets of

chips. He started eating and after a while he wasn't grizzling no more.

By the time we'd got back to the flats the lifts were mended, but they still stunk of piss and booze. That reminded me of Kevin. I hoped he'd be gone by the time we got back. My stomach felt funny and I felt strange. The thing is, I can't really be scared of Kevin, because I know him so well, but I should be scared of him. If I was more scared, then I wouldn't let him in. I'd keep the chain on. But he's so nice sometimes. When he hasn't been drinking and he can be charming when he wants.

The door was open when I got back. I thought it was burglars at first, but it was just Kevin not bothering to shut the door. The telly was still on. Anyone could've come in and stole anything but they hadn't. The place smelt even worse of beer and fags. I went to the fridge, but all the beer had gone. There wasn't even empty cans around. I lit another fat and looked round. Damon was sat in front of the telly. I walked around the kitchen, opening cupboards, seeing if anything was missing. The radio was still there. The clock, everything looked in its right place. I walked to the sitting room and checked that too. It didn't look as if he'd taken anything. But when I went into the bedroom, the draws of the dressing table were open and the five pound note I keep in there was gone. So were my fags. I think of killing him, like those women on the telly. They mostly get away with it, but some don't, they get put away for years and years. I think of leaving and going to a hostel, but he'd only find me. And he doesn't really hurt me, not a lot. He doesn't mean to anyway. He just loses control. Men are like that.

Anyway, for the next few weeks I kept the large kitchen knife by the door, and I kept the chain on. I saw Mr. Mitchell and I said definitely

this time I will press charges, I won't withdraw them. What he did to me was wrong, only he said he was still my husband and it was the law. Then one night there was a knock. I ignored it at first but then I thought I have to answer it. I peeped round but it was only the Avon lady. Then next time it was the Gas Man, then the Bettaware people and eventually I didn't bother with the chain. By this time Kevin hadn't been round for ages and so you forget what it was like don't you. So I was watching the lottery on a Saturday night, and my numbers hadn't come up even though there's only 49 numbers and I did ten lines, so that's 60 numbers so you'd think I would win something wouldn't you? I was excited because two numbers did come up straight away and I thought it was my lucky night. Damon was still up, and when I answered the door I never thought it would be him.

-Daddy, daddy, said Damon and rushed over to him

-There's my boy! Kevin said.

He had his hand behind his back and said - for you. They were carnations, red carnations.

-No, Kevin - I said - you shouldn't, it's not right.

-They're to say sorry - he said - and I've got wine. Not beer, wine. I just came to see Damon...and you of course.

-no funny business

- no definitely not

He came in and we had the wine and it was like old times. I put Damon to bed and he started screaming

- I don't want to go to bed, daddy, daddy

-Be a good boy, Damon , do what your mum tells you

- No! He said

-Go now - said Kevin -else daddy'll be cross. Go now!

But Damon stood there, he started grizzling again.

-Go to bed! said Kevin, and he reached over to him and took him by the hand.

-I'll take him to bed, says Kevin.

I could hear the sound of Kevin hitting him from the living room. I switched the telly up. He was a naughty boy, you can't blame Kevin, that boy would make anyone lose their rag. When Kevin came back he was annoyed

-That bloody boy. Why can't he be like other boys? Other boys aren't always crying and acting sissy like

-cos he doesn't get any discipline at that school I says.

-You spoil him, Kevin says.

-No I don't. One thing about me, you can't accuse me of spoiling the boy.

-I say you do, he says menacingly, and my heart sinks. He's picking an argument, on purpose

-No Kevin - I say - backing out the door

-No what - he says - You're my wife.

-Not now I'm not, no Kevin don't. By this time I'm at the door, I don't look upwards towards the knife, I want to reach it before Kevin sees it. It's almost covered by a coat. I fumble and he says



-What the hell are you doing! - and pulls down the knife - You were going to use this on me?hesays - you bitch! And he pulls me down, I scream, someone's banging on the wall and shouting "shut up". I can hear Damon crying as well. Kevin shouts upstairs: if you get up you're bloody for it Damon, I'll give you what for. Then he drags me in the living room he switches up the telly even more and he says - You're for it now!"

I look around for the knife, but he's left it in the hallway. He sees me looking

- I don't need no knife, he says

-Kevin, you bought me flowers, wine, you said no nonsense.

Kevin laughs - You stupid cow, - he says - you never learn.

The end

## 7. Two days from Alan's diary

I love Saturdays. It's the best day of the week for me. Better than Sundays even, it just feels better. This Saturday I had a lie-in, although I was awake I just stayed put for a while. Last night I got completely rat-arsed; I hadn't been like that for a long time. It was totally brilliant. Me and my mates from school. There's Tony - he's a gas fitter now, and Ed, he does some decorating. I don't talk much about what I do, they might think I'm boasting. I can't remember much about last night anyway. It was in a pub up town that all I know. I don't know how I got home, I was so pissed. It was really good.

Saturday I pick up the kids. Julie and John are crazy about me - Donna has all the problems. I only see them weekends anyway and I always make sure they do tons of things, so much that Donna says I spoil them. She gets really annoyed sometimes, she says "How can I discipline them when you keep giving them all these treats? But they're only little, they don't understand what's going on, I have to make it up to them. She says I should never have been a dad, I'm like a kid myself. I said to her "it bloody took you as well you know, it wasn't just me. I said to her once "It's you who's changed, not me, I'm the same as ever". And she said "Too right, that's the problem". I don't know what she meant, she's so illogical sometimes.

Anyway, I was lying in bed thinking over all these things, as you do, and I forgot the time. I wasn't really asleep but when the phone rang it sort of woke me up. It was Donna saying "Why aren't you here? If you promise John and Julie you're going to be here you should be here...blah blah blah". She ought to know me by now I'm always late. I'm reliable in that way. Anyway, it's not as if she was going anywhere, she'll only be going shopping, or hanging around with

those friends of hers. They were the ones who turned her against me, giving her all sorts of ideas, things she wouldn't have thought of without them. But she said that was rubbish, she talked about me with them because she wanted to. But if they had never encouraged her it would've been all right, I know it. I said "Calm down woman". That really annoys her. When I tell my mates what I've said, they say it's really sexist, but it isn't sexism it's that I really want to annoy her. Anyway, when she gets annoyed she really gets in a state, and then threatens me by saying she won't let me see the kids, so I've got to tow the line.

So anyway, I jumped out of bed and drove through all the Saturday traffic. When I arrived there was a note left on the door, saying "had to go out - John and Julie are at mums". So then I had to drive half way back again to go to her mums. It took me ages to get there, I couldn't believe it when I arrived, she'd pissed off too. I was really getting annoyed, I could feel I was starting to get angry, I kicked the car and a load of rust fell off. Then I saw them walking down the road. I couldn't be angry with them, it wasn't their fault, they're only kids so I swallowed it and made out all was OK.

"All right Viv" I said, I couldn't call her mum, I never did.

"I suppose so. I had to do something with the children, we couldn't just sit there all morning waiting for you to come"

I know she was just trying to wind me up, so I wasn't going to rise to it. "I'll take the now" I said calmly. I was pretty angry inside, but I didn't show it. I put John in his kiddyseat and Julie insisted on sitting in the front even though the seats broken and she's practically lying horizontal. Anyway, I was driving out of a side turning, pretty sharpish like you do, and suddenly this woman going down the main road screeches to a stop. She opens the window and shouts at me

"What do you think you're doing coming out like that? Don't you read your Highway Code?" (As if anybody does!). She shouted "You could've caused a nasty accident blah blah blah". At first I didn't know what she was talking about, then I realised the nose of the car was out just a bit. Not much thought. Not enough to go spare over. I thought for a moment and then said "Get back in your car you silly woman!" in a tone which was meant to annoy her. She got straight back in her car and drove off. I got straight back in mine and that was that. I felt pretty pleased with myself, but Julie said I was sexist. She's only 9 for God's sake, she shouldn't be worrying about things like that; she's only a kid. I told her so and she got angry and then sulked. It took me ages to get her out of it. Its only bloody Donna that gives her all these ideas. Probably Carol as well come to think of it. When I told Carol later she said it was sexist as well. "That not sexist" I told her - "after all, she was silly and she was a woman". I thought it was really funny but Carol didn't see it. Later on I told my mates, they couldn't see the problem, they laughed.

Later on that day we saw a movie. By the time the kids (and me!) had eaten popcorn and chocolates and cola they were in a really good mood. The movie was a really daft thing but the kids loved it. I have to admit I did laugh once or twice, but it was a bit childish for me. I prefer action movies myself. I got my old Terminator DVD out and showed it to the kids, but Julie said she didn't like it and John cried. Julie said that Donna said I shouldn't show them that stuff. Anyway I haven't since then.

Then Carol came round and I made us all a great meal of all sorts of (vegetarian) things. I like cooking, although I don't generally let on. I bought vegetarian sausages too but Julie wouldn't eat them. I should've known. Then after a bit more TV, we put John to bed and read him a story - a nice animal one instead of the Ghost one I

started last week. He had nightmares after that. Then Julie and I played on the Wii so that was good.

Then I told Carol I was going out for a quick drink with the lads. I asked her to come with me, but she didn't want to go out, but I'd promised my mates I'd go for a drink with them, so I couldn't get out of it could I? Carol was pretty angry at first, she said "I don't come round here to babysit you know" But I told her, I want you to come with me, Tony and the rest are expecting you, why don't you come with me? I've already told Becky that she can babysit them"

Carol said, "Save your money, I don't like all that stuff anymore, I don't like the noise, and I don't find a lot of the jokes funny, and besides, I'd be the only woman".

"What does that matter for God's sake? You get on with them, we used to have a laugh"

"I know" Carol said "and we still could, but just tonight I don't fancy going out, its only drinking, it's not like a meal or something"

"We could have a curry" I pretended to persuade her, but I didn't really want her to come anyway, I wanted a night out without women, after a while you want to be with your mates don't you? You don't want women round all the time. But I must admit you do want them when you get home. Anyway, I knew the curry thing wouldn't persuade her, she prefers French food, and anyway, we'd already eaten.

"No you go if you want" she said in a tired fed up way "I'll wait for you; I always do - but don't come in too late, I'll be asleep. Not that its easy sleeping on a mattress on the floor in the front room"

"Don't go into that again" I was getting a bit annoyed now "Don't lets argue". "Either you come with me and Ill ring Becky to come round, or I go on my own - in any case, I won't be long"

I could see she thought "why am I bothering to come round and why do I bother with him" but that's what I'm like. Take me or leave me. And most of them take me.

So I went up town with my mates, first we drank in a little pub near Soho that Kevin likes, then when that closed we went to some other place where they stayed open later. But that was closer to home, I didn't want to find I couldn't get home cos I was too pissed. It was a wine bar, the second place it sold really watery beer. I didn't think it was having an effect, but when I got out I was really unsteady and I said to Tony "I'm pissed" He said "you always are" so that was a really profound conversation. We walked a lot of the way home, when I got in I stumbled into the living room and tripped over the mattress, I forgot which house I was in for a moment, I forgot the bedroom was the living room. Carol shrieked, I whispered "it's me for God's sake it's me, shut up, you'll wake the kids" Not that I think they would wake up, but you think carol would know it was me. "It's your fault" Carol whispered in a shouting sort of way "you should come in quieter, not creep up on me and then fall over"

"I couldn't help bloody falling over, I didn't mean to" and then, I don't like saying this because it sounds awful, I was sick all over the bed. It sounds funny now, because I said "Oh God, I feel ill, I've been sick on the bed" and Carol said "it isn't a bed, it's a mattress" which was a pretty odd thing to say at the time, as if it mattered! I can't remember much more, next thing I knew, it was morning, the sun was shining through the crack in the door, the bedcovers seemed

clean, and I could smell breakfast cooking. A perfect end to a great night.

## Monday

I got up early this morning. Some bloke was outside washing his car and playing his stereo at the same time. I opened the window and shouted at him and told him to fuck off. He gave me some stick back but after I threatened to come down he stopped. Good job no one from work can see me. Then I hopped on my bike, and off I went. Well, after putting on all my leather gear and stuff. Its brilliant this leather. I feel really good on the bike with it, it's a shame I have to change into something else when I get to college. The students, well the women anyway, they love it. Carol loves it as well. She can hardly keep her hands off me. None of them can. It's not my fault, I don't go after it, women just follow me and proposition me wherever I go. I'm not complaining. Anyway, I jumped on my new Triumph, a classic; cost me £3,000 - goes well up to 150mph easily. I got to college in minutes. Then when I got there I had to behave myself, put on a serious look and change into smart gear. Funny, the jumper was given to me by Susan for Christmas, Carol gave me the shirt, Donna the tie, and Lisa bought me the underpants. I bought the trousers myself. It's good having lots of women, you get lots of clothes. I was only at college for the morning; I gave a brilliant lecture, they all came up to me after and said. I still don't feel like a lecturer, I feel it's just a part I'm playing, but Carol said I'll get used to it, she's been doing it for ages of course, she acts like a lecturer, all snooty and posh with the students, she's not like that with me. What I could tell them about her!

I went for an AIDS test in the afternoon, Carol made me. She even said she wanted to see the little slip you get; she doesn't trust me. You could understand it if she knew about all the other women, but she doesn't. She only knows about Susan. I shouldn't have told her, but I thought I was in love with Susan. Carol was really upset. Now I've broken up with Susan, well, not quite but sort of, it's OK. Carol buys me more expensive things than Susan does, she's set me up in this flat, she bought me a car. I know it was only an old banger but it still cost a few hundred. It's not just that, she loves me you see. Really loves me. The others say they do, and I tell them the same. You have to don't you? They love it. I know I haven't got AIDS anyway, hardly any straight people have it unless they've been fixing themselves up. Carol already had an AIDS test a few years ago, after I told her about Jackie. Carol's a bit neurotic, but being ten years older than me she's more worried about these things. Myself, I don't worry. Carol said it was just a short blood test, in and out of the hospital in five minutes but it wasn't. It must've changed. I had to talk to this really attractive woman, it was embarrassing telling her all about my sex life. Then not only a blood test, but they put this needle up your dick, it didn't half hurt. Plus it was embarrassing. All this for Carol, and I know I'm negative anyway. I have to wait two weeks, although I know I'll be all right I'm still a bit nervous. A bit like that time Donna thought she was pregnant again.

After the test I biked to Donnas, she wasn't in of course - I knew that. She was at work, but I still have a key. I looked through her files to see what she was up to. I saw she'd booked a holiday, not a cheap one either. It pisses me off when I pay her all that money every month, her with the house and everything, when I've only got a poxy flat. Then I rang her, from her phone, and told her what I thought of her. We had a huge row, I told her to fuck off, she told me she



wouldn't bring John and Julie round again if I was going to talk like that. She told me I wouldn't talk to people at work like that. Dead right. I'm a lecturer now, I have to watch myself.

Later I met Lisa in the afternoon. But I was careful, not much point in having an AIDS test if I go and ruin it. Told Lisa the usual things, she complained she didn't see enough of me. I won't say what I said.

Had to get back to the flat for Carol coming round. The place looks a wreck, it smells a bit, last month a couple of students came round and cleared the place up, but I can't risk that now. I tidied up a bit anyway, made a great meal. Showed Carol the slip from the hospital, lucky it was dated because of course I'd given a false name. She believed me anyway. I'd promised Susan I'd be round later, so I had to get Carol out fairly early, but I said I was going round to see mum, and I did pop to mums around midnight. She never goes to bed until 1, she can't sleep much these days. Carol was tired as usual, she's not such good fun as she was a few years ago, but as she keeps telling me, she was younger then. I hope I don't get tired by the time I reach forty. But I still feel like a kid anyway so maybe by the time I reach forty I'll feel sort of adultish. For some reason I asked Carol to live with me. I don't know why, I didn't even think about it. It's difficult living alone. When Carol was here she was horrified at all the dirty cups and plates piled up, and washing in the machine waiting to be done. So she did it all. She knows how hopeless I am with all that stuff.

So I saw mum, then went to Susan's, told her I'd been working late and had fallen asleep. But the time I went round there I'd livened up, I was ready for it, and I got it. But I'm tired now. I didn't stay there long, just long enough. So now I'm about to fall into bed, I'll fall asleep straight away, nothing worries me.

The END