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Opening Extract from...

Arms Wide Open

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1

Meredith

It's a Thursday afternoon and Meredith is staring at a pot of yogurt. It's been in the fridge for almost a year, left there by her husband on the same day he left her too. It sits unopened and untouched. Preserved like evidence from a crime scene. Covered with the invisible fingerprints of a man she still loves.

Of course, her two children have complained about it over the months. It's been easy to dismiss Jemima's disgust for the simple reason that she's a teenager; everything horrifies her. The time will doubtless come when even *having* a refrigerator will affront one of her new-found sensibilities: a fleeting sympathy for Chinese factory workers, perhaps, or a dislike of capitalist societies and their self-indulgent white goods.

Luke's critique was more surprising, all the more so coming from an eleven-year-old boy who rarely expresses an opinion about anything. Unlike his sister, he didn't think it 'gross', 'perverse' or 'proof of a monumental midlife crisis'. He just thought it 'unhealthy'. And in that simple diagnosis, Meredith momentarily felt naked and transparent, unsure whether he was talking about the yogurt or her.

Yet here it is, all this time later, still sitting in the refrigerator.

And Meredith still finds herself staring at it on a regular basis, not even sure any more what it represents, but certain that whatever is happening to its contents is a fitting parallel of her own life: a slow liquefaction, the irreversible death of something good. And it's all happening beneath a pristine exterior. A bacterial Armageddon perfectly contained by a cheerful plastic pot and a shiny foil lid.

Jemima

Jemima gets home from school to find her mother like this, staring into the refrigerator, so absorbed she doesn't even notice she's being watched.

Saying nothing, Jemima quietly retreats to her bedroom, thinking of her father as she climbs the stairs two at a time. It would be wrong to say he left a year ago; in many ways, he left them a long time before that, was possibly never even with them in the first place. An astronomy professor, he'd made no secret of the fact that outer space was more appealing than family dramas; that the complexities of planetary physics made more sense to him than the thoughts and actions of his own children.

In the long months since he had left them to move in with another woman, Jemima's found other ways to fill his place. It was just a joke at first: using a picture she'd copied from a website; pretending to be Lucy, a twenty-something blonde girl with the kind of smile that means many things to many people. But Lucy was an instant hit on dating sites, and overnight Jemima went from being a girl ignored by her father to a woman surrounded by men, all of whom have been happy

to lend a hearing ear and a shoulder to cry on. Yes, it's true they do it in the expectation that Lucy will one day be on all fours paying it back with interest, but hope springs eternal, and for every man who tires of the chase, a new one starts to woo her.

In the privacy of her bedroom, Jemima turns on her computer, checks her mail. There's a message from one of her newest admirers urging her to meet for a drink as soon as possible. She knows her reply so well, she types it almost without thinking: 'I would love to meet, but I've been hurt in a previous relationship and I'd prefer to take things slow.'

It's a useful line, but it's hard to keep using it month after month as confidences are shared and intimate subjects broached. Only last week, after nearly six months of correspondence, she'd told one of her most loyal suitors that she still couldn't meet because she'd just got back from India with a bad case of chlamydia. And though she later insisted she'd meant cholera, the damage had been done. Such are the perils of pretending to be old before one's years.

Jack

Jack's not just having a difficult year, he's having a *Hindenburg* moment: in recent months, he's learnt the hard way that life is made of a highly flammable material. After seeing his career crash and burn, he's watched the flames spread to every other part of his carefully orchestrated life, melting it into something so distorted it almost takes a forensic skill to see the link between past and present.

He ponders this as he peers at himself in the bathroom

mirror, unshaven and bleary-eyed, barely out of bed in the middle of the afternoon.

Until twenty minutes ago he'd at least still had a girlfriend, but she's just ended the relationship with a cocktail of terminal contempt: a generous fistful of expletives shaken over ice and served straight up. And as the door slammed behind her, Jack's only thought was that he couldn't even remember her name.

His arrival at the office goes unnoticed. It's commonly accepted that he's on some kind of extended leave, prone to drifting in and out purely because he's one of the agency's founding partners and can do whatever he likes.

The newer recruits assume this is the leisured life of a successful man. Only his contemporaries know better. In their mouths, words like 'taking a break' are mere euphemisms for having lost his edge, the man who once blew creative ideas like an oil rig now finding the well has run dry.

Jack is busy with a game of Angry Birds when Harry, his business partner, pops his head through the open doorway. 'Right, Jack? I didn't expect to see you back so soon.'

Jack knows this is Harry-speak for 'Please leave before you do something terrible.' In the final months before he had agreed to take a break, Jack had resorted to ever more desperate measures to get the ideas flowing, a sort of creative fracking in which he drank larger and larger amounts of alcohol in the hope of triggering a response. The ideas didn't come, but the embarrassments quickly began to pile up, so that for a while his presence in the office was as welcome as airborne tuberculosis.

'How was St Lucia?' says Harry, his body language – leaning awkwardly through the doorway, half in, half out – suggesting that this is purely a brief catch-up before Jack goes away and does something. Anywhere but here.

'Hot,' replies Jack, struggling to think of something more profound to say about a holiday he hadn't enjoyed. 'Good cocktails.' He notices Harry's expression. 'Not that I had many.'

'Look, the guys are getting ready for a big pitch next week. They're not going to have much time for socializing.'

'Sure, I just wanted, you know, to be back here for a while.' Silence. 'It's been a rough day.'

'Tell you what, you should go away again.' The atmosphere stiffens. 'I'm not saying that being here is a bad idea . . .' And now he flounders because they both know that bad ideas have become Jack's hallmark in recent months. 'What I mean,' he adds, trying a little too hard to sound chummy and reassuring, 'is you'll be back on the job soon enough. And then there'll be no time, so *carpe diem*! Go skiing or something. Sail around Tahiti.'

Jack stares at him, sober enough to realize that this is his cue to leave for another month, two, maybe even more. 'Yeah,' he replies. 'Perhaps you're right.' And even though there's nowhere he wants to go, nowhere really left to go, he forces a smile. 'I'll send you a postcard.'

Luke

It's not just a cigarette butt, it's a story, Luke is certain of that. He crouches on the ground beside the phone booth and peers closer. It wasn't merely stubbed out, it was *mashed* into the concrete with a force that seems almost vengeful.

Luke wonders if the person had been talking on the phone to someone who made them angry. Or perhaps they just felt guilty about smoking: one last puff and then they wanted to destroy the evidence. As he carefully lifts the shreds of paper, he sees smudges of lipstick – and what lipstick! The kind of colour that makes him think of fairground rides and party balloons.

He puts it in a Ziploc bag for safe keeping, knows before he even looks up that he has an audience yet again: the same old woman who often stands in her living-room window and watches as he inspects the ground around the phone booth. Occasionally even stands there with the same blank gaze as some of the other kids from school punch him or throw his bag over the nearest wall.

He and the old lady make eye contact for a few seconds but, as ever, Luke can't decide if she's interested in his presence or worried by it.

Not for the first time he considers waving hello, but then he wonders if she might mistake it for some other kind of hand gesture. And, yes, he could just smile, but with the distance between them it would have to be such a theatrical, over-the-top smile, he'd probably end up appearing even more threatening. So instead he walks away, pondering now what *she* knows about the mystery cigarette smoker.

Luke's biggest discovery of the day comes a couple of streets from home. Parked beneath a tree, a car like Uncle Jack's. On closer inspection, it not only *is* Uncle Jack's car, but Uncle Jack is sitting in it, staring at the empty street.

Luke stands beside the passenger door, observes him for a moment, but it's clear Jack's mind is far away. Finally, he knocks on the window.

'Shit!' yells Jack, so obviously startled that Luke decides he and his uncle may be kindred spirits after all.

Moments later, Jack is opening the passenger door and Luke is scrambling in.

'I think,' says Luke, 'you're not supposed to use language like that in front of me.'

'Nonsense. There are many situations in which a good swear word is the only appropriate response.'

Luke locks the door behind himself, as much for Jack's benefit as his own. 'We don't live on this street.'

'Yes, thank you, Luke. I am actually on the way to your house.' Perhaps aware that even a child can see that the car is stationary, he adds, 'I'm just … just getting in the right frame of mind.'

They sit in silence for a few moments. Two men in a place of refuge.

Jack grimaces at the street, at its neatly trimmed hedges and shiny Volvos. 'One day, you'll realize how much you hate this place. And from that moment on, your life will never be the same.'

Unsure what to make of this advice, Luke concentrates instead on the way Jack says it: how his voice drifts off into a sad silence, so that Luke can't decide whether Jack is trying to tell him that one day he'll find something or lose it for ever.

2

Meredith is nowhere to be seen when Jack and Luke get home, but evidence of her recent presence is all over the kitchen: a large basket of laundry, so fresh it scents the air; an aborted attempt at housework, the steam iron unplugged but still warm to the touch.

Jack goes to the window, already knows she'll be out in the concrete expanse of her back garden, tending one of the small troughs that pass for flowerbeds in her world.

When Meredith and her husband had first moved in, they had optimistically called the garden 'entertaining space' but, being realistic, it's more like a miniature execution yard: the perfect place to bring people together, then gun them down. And yet there's Meredith, working with such reverence, it's as though she alone can see what's really there: not a sad concrete trench but, rather, a magic garden, an invisible kingdom.

Jack calls to her: 'You have a guest for dinner.'

'Hello, stranger! What a lovely surprise.' She clambers upright and wraps him in a big hug. 'I'm making fish pie tonight, but it's such a breeze I thought I'd do a little gardening first.' They stand in silence for a few seconds, looking at a

flowerbed that contains little more than cold, dark mud and a few dead plants. 'It's winter, of course, so there's not much to see right now. But there's still work to do.'

She brushes a strand of hair from her face and unknowingly smears mud across her brow. Before Jack can say anything, Meredith's elderly neighbour, Edna, steps from her house. She steadies herself against the doorframe and starts to mumble at the sky.

'Bloody hell, she's still alive,' says Jack.

'She's a sweet old thing, really.'

'You know, I might go and see if she needs anything.' Meredith stares at him, clearly too shocked for words. 'I was thinking on the way down here I should start doing some charity work. To show people my good side and … and, you know, reach out to sad, tragic people.' He glances at the old woman again. 'There's no time like the present, surely.'

Unfortunately for Jack, Edna wants only to talk about the Second World War – which she's convinced continues to rage on all around them.

'It's more of those flying bombs,' she says. They watch as a British Airways jet passes overhead on its way to Heathrow. 'It's when the engines stop you have to worry.'

'I think we're all agreed on that one,' replies Jack.

Edna's dog joins them, an ageing mutt with milky white cataracts and creeping patches of mange.

'Your dog looks quite poorly,' says Jack.

'Reggie? He's going to die.'

'Is that what the vet said?'

'What do I need a vet for? One look and you can tell he's not long for this world.'

She mutters her disgust at Jack's obvious stupidity and gazes skyward again, scanning the clouds for more signs of doom.

The only note of sympathy is from Reggie. He cocks his head to the sound of Jack's voice, peering up in his general direction. Jack gives him an encouraging smile, aware that a blind dog won't get much from the gesture, but it seems the right thing to do.

They stand like that for a few moments, Edna gazing at the heavens while her dog tries to make sense of the world with his few remaining faculties.

'So, is there anything I can do for you?' says Jack, growing impatient now.

Edna gasps as a Qantas A380 comes into view. 'Dear God, is there no end to Hitler's madness?'

Before he's even aware of what he's saying, Jack can hear himself shouting at Edna, in the same voice that an overworked teacher might use in a school for the deaf, 'Why don't you join us for dinner tonight?'

Jack would be the first to admit that his understanding of women is limited. Through years of practice he's become attuned to their pleasure, in all its forms, but beyond that they're emotionally kaleidoscopic and confusing.

This is certainly the case as he watches Meredith prepare dinner. Until a short while ago, she'd appeared genuinely pleased to see him: now her every move is redolent of a sigh.

The last time she was like this was during a much earlier visit when he had drunkenly broken one of her favourite vases. Yes, she'd said she forgave him but, much like the vase itself, their relationship gained an air of restoration: the faint whiff of glue and a patchwork of telltale cracks.

'What if she'd agreed to come?' says Meredith. 'I can't imagine what you were thinking.'

'After a reaction like that, I would have gone back and told her we'd changed our minds.'

'Jack!'

'She probably doesn't even remember I asked.'

'Is this how you plan to be with all your charity work? Taking disabled children to the park, perhaps, then leaving them there because you've changed your mind?'

'Why does everyone talk to me like I'm some kind of monster?' He raises his voice to make sure she can't respond. 'Ask yourself, would a monster invite an old lady to dinner?'

'I think that depends on the monster's motives.'

'It's about giving and receiving, isn't it? There's more joy in giving.'

'So the invitation was actually for your benefit?'

'No,' he says, in a voice that means yes. 'Perhaps I just need to feel some joy right now. Perhaps I've come to you, my only family, because I'm in the grip of a joy recession. Is that okay?'

Meredith appears to consider the words, softens a little. 'To be honest, I'm surprised you even have time for us.'

'I've taken a few months off work.'

'Well, how generous of you to be here when you could be sitting on a beach in the Caribbean.'

'I got back last week.' He sees the indignation in her face, quickly speaks again. 'Look, is this about the vase?'

'Jack, what are you talking about? That was years ago.'

'But you haven't forgiven me, have you?'

'Of course I have.'

'Melly …'

'It was Victorian! It had survived two wars, not to mention a couple of children, which, if you were a family man, you'd know is a good deal more remarkable. And then you come along. A hundred and thirty years of perfection destroyed by my drunken, middle-aged brother.'

Jack looks hurt. 'I'm not middle-aged.'

'You're forty-three. How long do you really expect to live?' An uneasy silence descends on the room. 'Anyway, you should look on the bright side. You're my twin brother and yet somehow you manage to look five years younger than me.'

Jack's tempted to say, 'It's closer to ten years,' but this doesn't seem the right moment. Instead, he watches as she fills a baking tray with layer upon layer of fish fingers and grated cheese, eventually covering the whole thing with mashed potato. 'When you said we were having fish pie, that wasn't quite what I had in mind.'

Meredith appears to take this as a compliment. 'I know, it's so simple, isn't it?' She looks at the tray with genuine pleasure. 'It really takes no time at all.'

'If you like, I can do the cooking tomorrow.'

'You didn't say anything about staying.'

'Is it not all right?'

'No, it's fine. It's perfect, in fact. The kids are going away

with their father on Saturday.' She doesn't seem to notice the look of alarm on his face. 'I'll be grateful for the company.' She starts to attack the washing-up with the efficiency of a machine. 'And I'm visiting Mummy tomorrow. She'd love to see you.'

'She'd probably love to remember who we are, too, but that's not going to happen, is it?'

'Jack, she's dying.'

'Only in the sense we're all dying.' He bites a fingernail, a childhood habit he's returned to in recent months. 'It's a slow-motion loss of life called ageing.'

'Please, you know it's more than that. Even though she can't talk, I'd like to think she's still in there somewhere. That she's aware of us. That she remembers.'

Jack looks at her and, for the first time today, feels only pity: for this grown woman who still wants to believe in their mother's goodness; an eternal child who can be knocked down again and again and yet still go back in the hope of a hug.

'Melly,' he says, 'if I was her, I think I'd rather forget.'