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HOW TO BE HUMAN

Written by Paula Cocozza

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HOW TO BE HUMAN

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CHAPTER ONE

There was a baby on the back step. A white bundle, downward sloping, spilling two arms and a head, the head looking at the edge of the step precariously. Not really looking. The eyes were shut. One hand lay beside an ear, fingers stiffened into a fist that might have held something or lost something. Such a beautiful hand: its sliver of palm was streaked with shimmers of purple and blue, veins rubbed with moonlight.

The surprise came not from seeing the baby, but from seeing what was around her. A baby on the back step. It was the step that was wrong. She was meant – Mary turned to check she was alone before she finished the thought. She was meant to take the child into the house.

She stared down at the . . . Parcel, she thought, studying but not touching the sheath of white seersucker that lay between her feet and her door. She was thinking of the way it had been left to wait for her, so carefully wrapped. She squinted into her dark garden, half expecting someone to jump out and laugh at how she had fallen for such an extravagant practical joke. She was unsure

what kind of person would play a trick like that. In any case, no one moved. The bushes hunched secretively. From somewhere within the block of streets, the owl hooted again, on patrol from his warehouse. This was the first night she had heard him; now she had heard him twice.

Just the perfect baby on the step, her mouth open as if she had said something a while back. Wrapped in white, legs shrouded inside her bedtime ghost costume, lying incredible on a slab. Mary crouched for a closer look. She ran her thumb over the marbled forehead and traced the thread of violet that wriggled across one eyelid. There should be a note, she thought, with a sender's name. *Dear Mary. Congratulations on your new arrival. From—*. Obviously she didn't expect a note. It was the bizarreness of the situation that made her imagination busy, made her unfurl a couple of rigid fingers just to see what they held. But all they let slip was a fistful of night.

A heavy warm breath slid down Mary's throat. So this was what it felt like to be trusted. The proof lay here, beneath the knee that gently dropped to prod an arm, warm but still. She sucked in another draught of night medicine. The air tasted clear and dry and tangy with green spice. The baby's face remained impervious, so she jabbed the arm again, hoping to surprise the eyes open – but the eyes stayed shut. Oh, Christ. She had assumed, but what if what if the blood making the arm warm was not a sign of life but life's residual warmth cooling?

'No, no, no! You mustn't do that,' Mary whispered. She wished someone else were here, and she was very glad that someone else was not. With a hand hovering over the baby's chest, she cast around the empty garden again.

She was looking for help, and looking to see if anyone was watching. If she touched the baby, someone could witness her – what? It was not a crime to touch a baby. Though it might become one, if she were the last person to touch her alive. Mary cupped the head and carefully rolled it away from the drop. As she did so, the scalp popped softly at her fingers.

Her hand was slippery with sweat, so she wiped it on her jogging bottoms and shook the near shoulder, which made the head wheel back to face her with a stony roll. Mary pressed her cheek to the baby's chest, but it was her own brain she could hear, throbbing and whistling with fear. 'Psssst!' she said into the little ear. 'Are you OK? Please tell me you're OK.'

No answer.

Mary picked up the near hand. The palm was so plump, the lines on it were like seams sewn into cushions. She flattened out the fat bits between her thumbs and rubbed wisps of silver fluff from the crevices. She kissed the baby's forehead. Still not a flutter. Then she clasped the little nose in a firm pinch, waiting for the mouth to wake. These maulings made her feel that she was mugging the child for a breath. She hung on to the nose but she was flailing, a thief trying all the windows and doors, and still the mouth stayed shut. Mary let go of the nose and gently laid a finger on the purple vein, stroking it upward until she had prised open the eye. She held it like that, her fingertip pinning the lid to the brow. 'Wake up!' she hissed at the pupil. It was deep grey-blue velvet, replete with colour yet in denial of its colour. In a few months, this eye would be brown. Could the eye see her? The iris rolled into the corner of its socket, looking back at her through

misty glass from some far-off place, as distant and disinterested as a dead eye must be.

Several positional steps were necessary to lift the child. Concrete pared Mary's knuckle as she slipped a hand under the neck, forked another beneath the legs. How light the baby was! Moonlight tinted her face blue. With her long white robe, she looked like an infant just christened in time. Mary shook her gently, listening for the rattle as you might with a stopped watch, but the shake jolted the head forward and the blue pallor deepened.

An outside door closed nearby, one of those sounds that hides whether it has come from left or right.

Mary waited but the night was silent. There was nothing and no one to see. Only a snail in the corner of the patio broke out from his hiding place behind the plant pot and began to haul his short silvery string towards them. She drew the baby tightly to her chest. She had the baby, had taken possession of her by who knew what form of special delivery. Delivery, deliverance, she mused. Which was right? And what sort of damn brain did she have that in a moment of crisis it wanted to pick at the gaps between words? She brushed a leaf from the cap of dark hair and pressed her lips to the spot. The kiss produced a fluttering sensation in her stomach, then she realised the flutter was on the outside, and that against her own stomach a tiny foot flexed. She swallowed down a silent scream, let it growl around her belly. Somewhere there, it must have tweaked the baby's foot, because the toes twitched again, curling into the scream, and Mary let her breath go. The air and the words rushed out in one heavy stream. 'You're alive!'

She crossed her wrists over the little one's back, and squeezed her closer. Chest to chest like this, the child's rib-cage fitted exactly inside the cavity of Mary's own ribs. They were like two wicker baskets nested for convenience. The baby breathed inside her own breath, as if her own breath had consumed the baby's. Together their bodies rose and fell, their insides taking care of a conversation that neither of their tongues knew how to voice. If only the moment would hold them both still in their funny belonging. An airlock popped in Mary's stomach, a tiny bubble released, as if into the waters within her some new thing had stolen.

Amazing the way a baby could get inside you like that.

So here was an idea. Take her into the house. Just lie down on the bed, with the little one on top, pretty much as they were now, but horizontal. Standing out here with their bones snugly jammed, it made sense. Look at the sky beginning to lighten. Dawn was not far off. Who cared if she had no equipment, no nappies. The heat of her body, the stroke of her hand, were all the two of them needed. It would be enough for Mary to watch the baby sleep, to mind the rise and fall of her chest, to lay a hand on her heart and collect the pulse. She herself needed rest. A truck shook its heavy chains down the main road but the poppet in her arms slept on. Mary lifted her a moment, felt the weight of her, guessing her like a package she had signed for and promised to keep safe. It seemed obvious then that that was her job – to keep the baby safe. 'Flora,' she breathed into the sleeping ear.

All she needed to do was open the door and walk inside.

CHAPTER TWO

The beginning, when you looked back from the middle, had come four weeks earlier, one miserable Tuesday in June. Mary went to work, did her work, some of it anyway, came home from work. There was not yet anything to distinguish it from other Tuesdays of that time, which were themselves hard to distinguish from Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Mondays. She walked into the lounge, shrugged her bag on to the mound of envelopes on the table and glanced out the –

He was lying on the grass in the centre of her garden. He had chosen an ostentatious spot for a doze. But she didn't believe he was sleeping, because although his body presented itself as entirely still, his ears spiked sharply, ready to countermand his elegant sprawl.

Mary felt her way around the table to the window. At the corner of her eye, a stray hair bobbed and gleamed, large and knobbly as a hair under a microscope, but she resisted the urge to brush or blow it away. Now she had him in her sights, the slightest move seemed a concession. It might unlock their stand-off, whereas she wanted to

keep him where she could see him, which meant she had to stay right where she was, pinned to the rear window. She stared at him, her gaze a kind of cage, throwing down bars to the lawn to keep him trapped. One moment of inattention, and he would be free.

The complacency of his posture struck Mary as a provocation. He gave the impression of both purpose and ease, as if relaxation were just a pose and he might now, or now, or now, wake to quick feet. She understood his show of nonchalance was the disguise for an as yet unarticulated intention. He was curled loosely on the grass, but his head poked out from the bottom of the curve like an unfinished question mark.

What did he want?

He had come to her garden and no one else's. So he had chosen her, Mary, and he must have come for something. While she had chased from meeting to meeting, trying to nudge and soothe the large egos of her mid-sized, mid-table university's human resources, he had been idly sunbathing on her lawn. In a single visit he had acquired an air of permanence, as if he had been here yesterday and would be here again tomorrow. She tried to step out of her shoes, but in the heat her feet had swollen and the shoes stuck fast. She may as well have been caught in a glue trap.

His rudeness riled her. He had plonked himself smack in the garden in an obvious plea for attention, and now that he had it, he was making a big show of ignoring her. He was trespassing brazenly. His very presence, his solitary sit-in on her lawn, seemed to dispute something. Her right to be here. The supremacy of humans. The subordination of foxes. She began to speculate about where this might

end, briefly pictured him barking orders at her for dinner from his place at the table while she scuttled around the garden foraging for toads.

She shook her head – just a little, so as not to unsettle her stare. There were other things she should be getting on with. She needed to eat. Or sit down. She imagined a nice, comfy chair sidling up behind her, a well-upholstered chest, a pair of firm arms outstretched. But there were only three chairs left in the house and all were hard. 'What the hell is he doing?' she said aloud. Silly question, because he was doing nothing.

She bowed her head against the window frame, flaking a paint brittle, and trained her eyes on him through her favourite pane. The house had no other window like it; the fault was original. It was the fault that she loved. In this one segment, a broad wrinkle ran top to bottom, warped the glass, made the leaves look out of sequence with the branches, the picture jump like a scratch on a disc. Sometimes bits of garden life got lost within its folds. Sometimes, caught inside a magnifying seam, they grew. You could stand there and try out different ways to see what you saw. She rowned at the fox, who, despite her best efforts, was refusing to vanish into the kink. His eyes were sleepy slits; they gave the impression he had accidentally left the lids ajar. He had seen her. She supposed he had seen her. But it was impossible to be sure. And what if he had? What dull shape would she make behind the glass?

She straightened up and gave a little sway, watching his haunches hump and subside under the wrinkle as if she had run her hand over him.

The movement stirred the sun in the fox's lids and daylight leaked into the crack of an eye.

Ah, now she had his attention. Mary rocked her head again, and watched her prisoner's back ripple in muscular spasm. The pane seemed to buck his torso halfway to standing, then force him back down. He was caught in the crease of the glass, and as she bobbed and waved, she yanked him around like a puppet.

Time to open an eye.

He was looking at her. Half looking at her. Thinking.

One eye sufficed to contain her; let the other eye sleep.

From her swaying he'd say a breeze blew through her pen. Strange. No breeze out here. Swaying, swaying. No threat. Just shuffling shadows so. No problem there. Her edges fuzzed in his drowse, blurred in a haze of lashes and whiskers. Tiny Female, locked up all alone and too far away to care. Darker, darker fuzz because. It was fine. To shut the eye.

Mary gawked, strained to see through the glass. Do it again, she thought. Go on! Once more. So I know for certain. But she knew what she had seen. He had opened an eye, stared right at her, then shut it in a funny slow-motion wink. That's exactly what it was. He had winked at her. From the way he was lying there now, with both eyes clamped shut in exaggerated denial, it seemed obvious that the wink had been deliberate. With one gesture, he had opened up a line of communication between them. As if he had heard this thought, the tip of his tail flicked on the lawn.

Oh, Mark. What would you do, if you were here now, and this beast was in the garden?

Actually, she knew what Mark would do, because Mark had done it lots of times. He would dart to the

back door, dip a quick hand into his pot of stones and run at the fox.

The fox tilted his head, though his eyes stayed shut.

Yes, life was better now. Better and worse.

Even as Mary eyed the twitch of a ginger ear, Mark loomed before her at the wrinkled window. It was where the house began for them. They knew they were going to buy it as soon as they stood here and saw . . . Well, saw all that couldn't be seen. Not a building in sight. Not a chimney poked through. Even the high-rise blocks on Shepherds Bridge Walk were hidden behind a thick screen of vegetation. It was the only starter house on the market in their part of east London, right when the market slumped: a miracle they could afford it. Mark had reached round and squeezed her waist, in the way that she took to mean she needed to lose weight (she didn't) but which he swore meant nothing of the sort (it did). It was a work habit, he claimed. He was a quantity surveyor. Lean himself. While the estate agent paced in the hall, Mark had whispered, 'It's practically a forest!' and grabbed her lobe in his lips. She put the back of her hand to her ear and wiped off the saliva from five years ago. She had won that battle. It was her house now. Mary Green, 53 Hazel Grove, London E8.

On the other side of the glass, a spider ran along the guy rope of his web, legs blurring into a serif scrawl at the edge of her vision.

Her eyes stayed on the fox on the lawn.

Sleeping, or not sleeping.

What the hell was she going to do with him? This one must have escaped from the woods that ran between the back gardens of this terrace and the houses on the road behind. 'Woods,' she said, still said. It was her and Mark's

joke, because if you looked from upstairs in winter, you could make out the shape of a bicycle under a heap of ivy, the arms of a wheelbarrow thrusting up through brambles like a final plea from the drowning. It was just a patch of wasteland, but magical for all that – an island of wilderness in the inner city, left to do its own thing while property prices soared and the council forgot it was even there. Trees were overlaid so densely on trees that the greens meshed and knotted, and perspective itself seemed made of leaves. Locked inside a rectangle of terraced streets, the woods kept their secret. They belonged only to those who could reach them.

Footsteps chimed on the pavement behind her, but Mary was not going to be tricked into distraction. She watched the fox. Her front garden was reflected in this window anyway. It hung over him like a garden within the garden, a phantom mid-ground in which the soft edges of her shrubs, the long fingers of her giant palm, lurked. Just then, the outline of a passer-by with a pushchair stepped into this ghostly oasis. A tiny hand waved from beneath its awning. She liked it when that happened, but you had to catch them fast before they disappeared into the thick foliage of the laurel. After the pushchair vanished in there, she heard its wheels bump up the step next door. It must have been Michelle.

Focus, Mary. Don't let him go now. So what if you're tired and hungry. So what if you've crawled to the end of another miserable day in a job you hate and tomorrow will bring only more of the same, which will feel not the same but worse, and you can't sleep and can't eat, which means there's only waking and working, waking and working. And now *this*. What was she going to do?

She dropped her hip to prise off her shoes, one foot jabbing at the heel of the other, and that was when . . . He did. She saw it. He bent his ear to her. Just the one. His right. He really did. Tipped it forward, then pulled it back, showing her the darker hairs inside. First a wink, and now he had practically doffed his cap. Outrageous! She rapped hard on the glass. His fur filled the shape of the leaves and made them rust. The phantom garden vanished into the movement of his body. Each limb knew its duty. He regained his feet and changed direction in a single stroke. He didn't look back, didn't rush. She watched him over the wall, the white tip the last of him. Then she went to check both doors were locked.

The sound was a siren, a baby crying, a shriek that seemed to pass through a human pitch and turn animal. Mary opened her eyes. She reached for her clock, but her hand fell through unfurnished space. She had travelled in her sleep to the wrong side of the bed, the side that used to be someone else's. She sat up, unpeeling her back from the damp sheet, and kicked off the duvet.

The room was silent. Only the lull came in through the open window. That's how she thought of this special piece of night when the main road had fallen quiet and the birds had yet to sing – an overlapping of silences that meant it was around 3.45 a.m. Over the five months since Mark had left, Mary had come to know these hours well, but it still surprised her how quickly they passed. There was such a brief lapse from 3 a.m., when there was hope of sleep, to 6 a.m. when there was none. She got up.

Her room was at the front of the house and the window frames bloomed amber from the street. The blinds, which

had long since reneged on their promise of blackout, sagged and curled at the edges to reveal a wavy slice of road. She pulled back the fabric and a fly buzzed against the glass in protest. 'Sorry, Mr Fly,' she said. Then out of her sleepy eye something darted. A red smear of tail, a blur on the road, a moving speed mark, gone. She held her breath for further news, but all was still. Perhaps it was just the strange intimacy of seeing the street when no one else was seeing it, but Hazel Grove looked different.

The next morning Mary had her key in the front door when Eric called out. He was reversing down his path and nodded at the pram. 'I hope she didn't wake you. We've got a bit of a sniffle.'

Mary clocked the 'we', and wondered as she turned the key, double locking, why parents chose to live so much in their children's lives that they gatecrashed their first person. Eric and Michelle had moved in about a year after her and Mark. The four of them – and this was not something to be taken for granted with neighbours – had seen the insides of each other's houses. True, she thought of them as neighbours rather than friends, but they were friendly neighbours. Eric, especially. And then the children came. First one, then, not long ago, this tiny other.

'I didn't hear her,' Mary said at last. These days, Mary herself made very little noise through the walls.

'I'm hoping she'll be better by next weekend.' He glanced towards his top windows, where the curtains were closed, and lowered his voice. 'I really want to get Michelle out.'

Mary hadn't seen Michelle since the birth. It was Eric who had dropped by to show off the baby – Flora, had they called her? He had stood on the doorstep while Mary tried to sound appreciative. She looked again at the pram where Eric was stooped over the parasol. So this scrap was the source of all the noise. She had been born early, a pale slip in an enormous carrycot.

'This is hopeless,' Eric said, tilting the parasol. 'You think you can burn at this time of day?'

'You could stick to the other side of the road. Run through the sun, slow through the shade. Would that work? Where's George this morning?' She had no interest in George, but the little boy heard his cue and roared out from behind the hedge with his familiar scowl. He looked such a little shit. 'Ah, there you are!' she said. 'Excellent hiding place!'

'Say hi to Mary, George,' Eric said, his tone wavering between a command and a plea. He caught the boy under his arms and lifted him up. 'Come on, Georgie, you can say hi, can't you? Mary's going to look after you next Saturday. We hope.'

The child hid his face in his hands, turned his head, then, as his legs began to thrash, kicked his father in the groin.

'I should get going,' Mary said. She was thinking of her meeting at ten. What had Dawn said? 'Lateness non-optional.' A formal hearing, the paperwork for which was stuffed unread in her bag. It was pretty dire for a member of the so-called People team to be on the receiving end of the procedures she was meant to implement. 'Embarrassing,' Dawn had said. In fact, that was the only upside, that the whole business, rumbling on for months, had exposed

Dawn's managerial deficiencies. Mary had come down the path into the street and, unusually, was closing the gate behind her. 'But sure, Saturd—'

Soft, the thing her foot found instead of the pavement. Her sandal slid moistly forward and she lurched, her bag jumping off her shoulder, the strap unspooling quickly down her arm to her wrist. It was so hot that when the wetness touched her toes, she was grateful for its coolness, till she looked down and saw it. She had painted her nails blue the night before, and now, with her gold sandals, they seemed to mock her. 'Shit!'

'Oh dear,' Eric said, sniffing from a safe distance. 'Fox.'

'What?'

'That's how they mark their territory. You think this is your house. He thinks it's his.'

Christ, she thought. I'm not going through that again. It is my house. My name on the mortgage. But she didn't stop to answer. She was already hobbling back up the path.

'You've got to let them know who's boss!' Eric called. 'Find the hole. Mary . . .' He checked behind him and then said, softly, across her front garden, 'Get some vet's poison. You can buy it online.'

Mary flinched in understanding; the sensation was a small, interior nod. That was what Mark would have said too. The fox had entered her garden. He had laid a trap for her on the pavement. He was attacking her from the front and the back. He was there in the day, at night. She had no idea what he wanted, but she knew his incursions amounted to a sustained campaign against her. As soon as she got to her desk and Dawn stopped staring at her, she would go online.

'Shall we say seven next Saturday?' Eric said.

Indoors, Mary gripped the banister, hopped up the stairs and washed her foot over the bathroom sink. Why did he have to make her late today? The mess was so deliberately placed. He seemed to want to get her into even worse trouble at work. Of course he didn't want that. He was a fox! But at the same time she believed, from the force with which he was imposing himself, that he had sensed her vulnerability. She splashed at the porcelain. The fox's smell curled around the basin but would not run out with the water. She dried off, and in the bedroom sluiced her foot with Mark's old cologne. She had seen it in a box while he was packing, and now it lived on the shelf that used to be his. (He had put it up, and in that sense her shelf also felt like his.) There was little else left of him: a couple of shirts, a little wooden puzzle they had bought in the souvenir shop of some museum. She shut her eyes to the long streak of coffee that stained the wall.

This residual Mark was pretty good company. He gave Mary freedom and independence and never lost his temper. She had whittled him down to the perfect partner. Mark in a bottle, helpfully warding off the prospect of total solitude while kept in check by a heavy glass stopper. Today, though, she was letting him out. Whoo. The cologne was potent. She slopped some on the other foot too. Show the fox who's boss. That was the name of it, Boss. The fox was hardly going to notice that the logic was erratic, that this was Mark's scent. You couldn't expect a fox to be reasonable.

Ten minutes later, she stood the clean sandals on a few sheets of the local paper outside the kitchen door. Water soaked into the print, making the eyes of the poor owl in the photograph transparent. 'Tawny owl,' she read, just

as words from the other side of the page began to appear through his beak. Apparently they were nesting in one of the old factories by the canal. It would almost be worth losing sleep to catch a hoot, she thought, toeing a shoe clear of his feathers. She loitered by the step a moment. The sky was cloudless and the sun brightened a small circle of lawn, like the floor of an amphitheatre. What a waste. The disciplinary, an afternoon of conducting staff reviews while air-con froze her arms . . . She would leave as early as she could, come out here and make the most of it.

When she re-entered the house that evening, Mary could tell from the postmark that the envelope on the mat was from work, presumably containing belated confirmation of today's appointment. Her department was a shambles. She stepped over the letter and headed down the hall. It mystified her how Dawn had got that job, how she had the nerve to harass Mary for recurrent lateness and persistent failure to fulfil tasks, when she, as manager, couldn't even send out a letter on time. At the back door, Mary drew the bolts and cranked the handle up and down as clunkily as she could. The rattle was fear's emissary, sent out on reconnaissance while she hung back in its cover. If the fox was there, he would hear it and scarper.

The noise filled the garden. Then she followed, and she was in the garden, and he was on his feet. Or perhaps he had already taken to his feet at the sound. She thought to shout or chase him off, but the sight of him so close sucked away her breath. His jaws slackened to liberate his tongue and he licked his lips with her thoughts. As she hesitated, stalled by the sheer physical fact of him, the

fox seemed to occupy more richly the space that her hesitation created. His fur thickened. And the next thing she saw, after his intrusion, the absolute wrongness of his being there, was how magnificent he looked.

In the sunlight, his coat was glossily auburn with low-lights, which she thought of (absurdly, she realised) as expensive. He was making an effort with his posture. Head up, back not slumping, haunches taut, as if he had instinctively adjusted his tension at the sight of her. He lifted his snout; she supposed he was sniffing the air. Most striking of all, he was holding out his tail unquiveringly straight behind him. He must have been six feet, nose to tip, and like those large dogs she tried to avoid in the park, he seemed taller than a subservient animal should. His legs were black, giving her the idea that he was a creature of two halves: bright and conspicuous above, below full of subterfuge. He shone with a predatory capability, to which she felt herself instinctively deferring.

At that moment, the patio darkened and Mary glanced up. The sun had entered thick cloud, and even though the air was as warm as it had been a second before, and even though in a minute or two the sun would reappear, the effect was as chilling as a flame abruptly snuffed.

The dullness touched the top of the fox's head with a cool flutter. His ears twitched at the sensation but his eyes watched the human Female's feet as they Beetled back, Beetled back, enough to say. Respect.

The garden began to brighten, and the sun, edging out from the cloud, warmed Mary's arms. 'Not so sleepy today, then,' she said under her breath. She tried to speak without moving her lips, because she felt sharply alert to the idea

that any small movement from her might elicit a larger one from him. There was nothing to do but stare, because stopping staring struck her as the greater act of communication. Without a window between them, she felt unable to rely on the balance of power which yesterday she had assumed. Was he still in a cage of her making? Would he obey again her command to leave? His poise today was a stillness with caveats: every hair bristled with his power to surprise. Her palm turned upward, moved of its own accord, as a magnet moves. But she did not otherwise stir; his eyes held her in place.

He yawned then, dropped his lower jaw like a drawbridge and let it hang. There was something careless about the way he so casually showed her his fangs – there was no other word for them – and it was unclear to Mary whether the carelessness implied harmlessness or its opposite. His pink tongue flicked up, a string of saliva impaled on one spiked tooth, and then he shut his mouth, turned and headed for the back wall. Something about the way he did this – the way he kept his head up, held his brush aloft – suggested that he left out of choice, and on another day he might just as easily choose to stay. His exit, his magnanimous readiness to be the one to go, alarmed her, but she couldn't think why.

Mary hastened to the lounger to consolidate the territory she had regained. There was no sound from Eric and Michelle's garden, and she had no neighbour on the other side; the house had been empty since old Mrs Farnworth died last year. Mary stepped out of her skirt, unbuttoned her shirt and slipped her bra straps from her shoulders.

Since yesterday she had been waiting for this moment, the chance to nourish herself with sun and rest, but now

that she was alone the garden felt unsettling: not so much empty as temporarily vacated. It reminded her of flat-sharing with Saba years ago. There must have been ten or twelve apartments in that mansion block; and the garden, which they could all access, never felt private, even when you were the only one in it. As she lay out here now in her underwear, the space felt uneasily communal, as if she mustn't inhabit it too fully or freely. The fox had gone. She had the place to herself. But for how long?

She wished she had remembered her book, but she knew if she went to fetch it, the fox would take her absence as permission to return. So she lay there thinking instead about what had just happened, and her mind kept returning to one thought. Since there was nobody to hear, she said it aloud. 'He was as interested in me as I was in him.' It was hard to dispel the idea that he had come back for a second look, and that his repeated raids amounted to some sort of mission.

Perhaps because of this sensation, Mary heard every noise as a trespass. She jumped when a scorched leaf clacked across the patio. A shrub knocked against the fence, and each time she wondered who was at the door. Inside the clank of cranes where the old estate had been demolished, she heard the ringing of a telephone. Dawn had cited 'entrenched lateness'. And a 'disappointing attitude'. And other things Mary could no longer remember. Mary had been given every chance, but poor Dawn had been left with no choice . . . The disciplinary had ended as Mary knew it would, with a formal warning. Now every sound struck her as an attempt by some greater force to drive the threat home to her. If she lost the job, how long would it take to lose the house?

At some point, she must have dropped off, because when she next looked the lounger was in shade, her skin cool. Mary dressed quickly and walked down the garden; she had the idea for some exploring of her own. Twice the fox had made his exit over her rear wall. Unlike her neighbours, she had no gate to the woods, and the wall bowed at the force of a huge lime tree which was bursting through her boundary. Seven bricks had already fallen, making a desultory gravestone on the other side.

Peering over the back, with the masonry chilling her forearms, Mary saw that although the light had gone from her garden, something of the day was still left out here. One perfect rectangle of the hazel tree blazed yellow, a bright window of leaves. It looked for all the world as if someone – and she knew who – had got home and put the light on. She marvelled at the size of the fox's garden: all the woods, and no mortgage! A picture flitted through her mind of him beneath the hazel, stretched out in front of the TV after another hard day sunbathing, and suddenly she grasped what she had been unable to grasp earlier. The distinctive manner of his exit – his ease over the wall, his readiness to oblige her by leaving – made it clear that his departure was not an expression of compliance but of hospitality. In her garden, he saw himself as proprietor, and her as his guest.

Mary didn't see the fox the next time he came. But she knew he had called, because when she went outside the following morning to retrieve her sandals they had gone and a pair of blue boxers lay in their place. Torn and dusty, they were the sort of classic style that Mark used to wear. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. Now what was

she going to do? She paced her garden, scouring the long grass for a telltale flash of metallic leather. When she walked back to the house, dirty as they were, the boxers seemed to mock her. Men's underwear had no place in her house at the moment.

She looked up at her neighbours' windows. God! Did they belong to Eric? 'No,' she said. It was bad enough the fox had stolen into her garden, but she refused to let him break into her imagination too. The fact was, she would have to spend another day in the wrong shoes. Always the wrong shoes, bought two years ago for the promotion she hadn't got. She was, now as then, joint second-in-command of a people department sub-team of four. She felt herself irresistibly stepping into the footprints of a long-term failure. It was a delusion to think that working in HR for a university was stimulating, that it to some extent kept alive her own hopes of a second degree. If you worked in HR, your business was nothing but people and their problems. The underpants, scooped into a carrier bag, went in the wheelie bin as she clomped to the pavement.

Mary hurried across the park to the station, checking behind her at every bend. The path snaked through the grass, and she had the impression she was being followed. Footsteps shadowed her, passed her, came at her. She kept looking over her shoulder, to the sides, and the bright grass rolled around like a green bowl turning in someone's hands.