Close-Up

Sherry Ashworth

Dusk falls late in summer, and the man waits until it is dusk before he saunters up the leafy street. His eyes scan the grey wheelie bins left outside the houses, reading the numbers painted on them. 28. 30. 32.

He stops now and looks about him. No one around. Good. He positions himself between the bin and overgrown hedge shielding the front garden of number 32. He pauses, then sidles along until he reaches a point where his body is obscured, but he can see the door with its coloured glass panels and the sitting room, where the curtains have not yet been drawn.

Motionless, hardly breathing, the beat of his blood almost audible in his ears, he watches.

He watches the woman searching some shelves, partly obscured from his view. She's dressed in jeans and a cream-coloured fleece. His eyes flick past her to the brown corduroy settee where a young man is slumped, his legs sprawling, his eyes fixed on a TV screen.

"Jimmy," he mutters. "*My* Jimmy."

…

"Jimmy? I can't find the Psycho DVD – the one I bought last weekend."

My mum's head's cocked on one side as she reads the sides of the DVD cases.

"Jimmy? Are you sure you haven't borrowed it?"

I think for a moment. I did watch it a few days ago – but not upstairs in my room – I was round at Chris's – did I bring it home? Don't remember. I shift about on the settee, pick up the remote and channel-hop a bit.

"Stop that," says Mum. "You're annoying me. Well?"

I fling down the remote. "Dunno. I did watch it last week," I concede.

If this was a movie, there'd be background music now, a few slow, deep notes building in speed as my mum straightens, turns, and looks at me.

"So where is it?"

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"I'll have a look in my room later."

"Jimmy – I want to watch it *now*!"

I'm quickly rewinding in my mind to when I was at Chris's place on Monday. After the film we had a few cans of beer, then I headed out empty-handed. I remember getting my bus ticket out to show the driver and thinking, I've left the DVD at Chris's place. But, hey, it isn't as if it's a big deal. I can get it back in a few days.

"I think I might have left it at Chris's," I say.

The background music reaches a crescendo and explodes. There's a steady jungle-style drum-beat. Well, there isn't really, but you follow my meaning. My mum turns on me.

"I haven't even bloody *seen* it yet! You've got no right to nick things I've bought and take them round your friends."

"Hey, chill," I tell her. "I'll get it back. I'll call round tomorrow." Then I remember. Chris is on holiday. He went with his family to Florida and he's there for a fortnight. This is not good.

Maybe not tomorrow," I add hastily. "'Cause I'm working all day at Coffee Corp."

There's this mythical creature – the basilisk – if it eyes you, you turn to stone. That was the look my mum gave me. I'm trying to work out how to get from the settee to the door without crossing her path.

"You don't give a damn about anyone else, Jimmy. And especially you don't give a damn about ME!"

"Not true!" I shout, as I scramble off the settee, make for the door and take the stairs two at a time, run along the landing, and up again until I reach my bedroom.

And it isn't true. I love my mum, really. It's just that … how can I put this … she's got it in for me.

I know what you're thinking. That arguing about a DVD is pretty pathetic. You can get old movies like Psycho dead cheap these days. I know I've made my Mum sound mean and uptight but she isn't all the time. She was then, though. We have over fifty DVDs in our house. What's so special about Psycho? Well, admittedly it's arguably Hitchcock's finest work, excepting The Birds, and the shower sequence with Janet Leigh is one of my five top horror moments of all time but, hey, I'm digressing. You want the lowdown on me and my mum, Carol.

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But let me set the scene first. You've already got the voiceover- this is me, talking. It's my voice you're hearing. So now – as well as listening to me - picture me in my room now – I've got the attic bedroom. Imagine a camera positioned in the doorway, panning around. There's a tiny window, a navy blue square, as it's getting dark now. Next turn and focus on a wardrobe with the door open, and my gear spilling out of it – wardrobe not big enough. A TV/DVD combi on a chest of drawers, of which none shut properly – too much stuff. And an ummade bed snug under the sloping roof, with that black and white poster of James Dean stuck on it, except one corner has come loose of its Blu-tack and hangs down vertically. I reach up (because I'm on the bed) and try and fail to stick it back on.

That tells you everything you need to know, as you can read cinematic images. The attic bedroom – that sets me apart from my family (Mum, Steve my step-Dad, and the kids Stacey and Kyle). I'm like the Outsider, the one that doesn't fit. Yeah, that's cool. The Outsider. A film noir starring Colin Farrell as me. Once Melanie at school said I looked a bit like Colin Farrell, which was a chat-up line if ever you heard one, you will agree. Then all the mess – that tells you I'm a tortured genius, in the process of finding himself (and a clean pair of socks – I keep forgetting to put them in the wash.) And the James Dean poster – that I'm young and cool and angry. And also that movies are my life, and one day I'm going to be a movie director. I'm serious. Completely and absolutely serious. I bought that TV/DVD combi myself – with the money Gran left, though it didn't stretch to a camcorder, worst luck. *Gran* always believed in me. In her memory I watch as many movies as I can. So how can my mum say I lack ambition? The fact I put in no work for my AS Levels is because strictly they're not relevant. And anyway, like shooting a movie, you can always retake. Right now, I'm more into developing my own vision, my own signature. I don't want to be like anyone else, I'm not Tarantino or Hitchcock or Spielberg or the Coen brothers, especially as there are two of them. I'm me, whoever he is.

Good line, that. "I'm me, whoever he is." Yeah. Like it.

So I lie there, smiling, I've forgotten about the spat with my Mum, and the only cloud in my mind is that fact that I've got to get up at 5.15 tomorrow morning. Yeah, you heard me right. 5.15. I'm on the early shift at Coffee Corp, where I serve the coolest cappuccinos in town. Oh yeah, I said I'd tell you about me and my Mum. But you don't really want to know. There's not much to say. Mums aren't interesting, they're just *there.* Like the walls of your house – boring but necessary. And you ignore them until they start looking for the Psycho DVD you borrowed, know what I'm saying?

But when I accept my first Oscar, it'll all be different. "The one person I want to thank, the one person who made it possible for me to be here today, in every sense of the word – the most important lady in my life, my inspiration – let's hear it for Carol Keane!" The spotlight finds her out and a diamond tear glistens on her cheek. She's so proud of me she can hardly speak.

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I could give you the rest of my acceptance speech – I work on it most nights. In fact, as I wriggle out of my jeans and lean right out of bed to switch the telly on, I think I might adjust it slightly as I drop off to sleep – I could insert a joke about the Psycho DVD, so my mum remembers the bad old days and smiles through her tears. Nice one!

I'm smiling to myself as I settle down for an early night.

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LIZ'S DIARY

Thursday 26th July

First entry

I am starting a diary:

Because I'm bored. Because I haven't written a diary since I was fourteen. But mainly because I came up to bed early as I have to wake at 5 tomorrow for the early shift at Coffee Corp. I couldn't sleep, so I decided to tidy my desk, and found this notebook that I'm writing in now. It's got a greeny-brown marbled cover with an olive binding and is dead old-fashioned. Someone must have given it to me as a present, but I can't think who.

I opened the first page and when I saw its creamy blankness I itched to make my mark. I love writing – not just the feel of the pen pressing ever so gently but relentlessly on the page, but also making things real. When you put things into words, they stay forever.

But I don't want to write stories. I have no time for those. Like, what's the point of making stuff up when this whole crazy world is waiting to be understood and worked out and made sense of. Writing stories is like lying, in a way. Pure fiction. So that's why I'm writing a diary – everything you're about to read in here is true. I won't exaggerate or varnish or hide anything, even if it's painful and embarrassing. So, Maggie, if you're reading this (she won't be – but mums have a habit of accidentally picking up your diary!) don't say you haven't been warned.

So – for posterity – I'm Elizabeth Burns, 17, and I live with my Mum, Maggie. People call me Liz. Those are the bare facts. What am I like? Ordinary. Well, no. No one likes to think they're just ordinary. I'm not one of those pink, fluffy, girlie girls – there are so many of them at college like with their straightened hair and low cut trousers. I'm not a Goth, though I can see where they're coming from. My hair's short, and gelled into spikes when I can be bothered. I had red bits put in a few months ago and they're still visible. I haven't got ready for bed yet, so I'm still in my Che Guevara T-shirt and brown combats. Lookswise, my eyes are too large and my nose too small. I wear a nose-ring. I've thought about getting other piercings but I'm not sure.

Other stuff about me – I'm currently single. I have had a couple of boyfriends but both were disasters. The first one was when I was only 14 and I wanted to see what it was like, going out with someone. It lasted a month until he proposed marriage – at 14! That gave me second thoughts. So I finished with him. Last year I went out with Darren because I thought he was cool. He always so looked so miserable and I thought I could cheer him up. He was brooding and discontented and sold the Socialist Worker in the city over the road from McDonald's. Only he turned out to be a) boring b) more cheered up by the weed he smoked than me, and then he was even more boring and c)

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dying to get me into bed which was even more boring still. So I finished with him too.

Now I'm perfectly happy not having a boyfriend, despite the fact that all the girls at college are boy-obsessed. I mean, it's sad. Here we are in the twenty-first century and still girls are rating themselves by whether boys fancy them or not, or thinking having a boyfriend makes you whole in some weird way. What I'm saying is that I don't want a relationship – they always end in tears. Just getting off with blokes is OK, having fun, having a laugh. But as soon as you start trusting someone or depending on someone, you risk being let down.

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