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When to Walk

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Extract

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Saturday

A few days ago I was drifting past The Admiral when a man lurched towards me with a black-and-white photocopy of a ten-pound note. As he spoke he spat. He said, 'Got a couple of fivers?'

I gestured to indicate that I hadn't and felt relieved that it was true.

At once he amended his deal to a single fiver, which I did have.

A tenner for a fiver: great.

I'd noticed him about the streets for some time, always in a filthy-looking overcoat. Close up, he smelled filthy as well, added to which his shoes were split and lacking their laces.

He repeated his new offer with escalating volume as though he thought I might be deaf. 'A tenner for a fiver,' he said. 'A bleeding tenner for a bleeding fiver.'

I am, in fact, quite deaf in one ear, but he didn't know.

Go round the corner where The Admiral is, wander along the High Street and there are five shops with photocopy machines: two newsagents, a stationery shop and two actual copy shops. In four of them a single copy costs 5p. The fifth

place, Margin's, charges 7p. Why opt for 7p? I decided it was reasonable to assume that the man's black-and-white tenner had set him back 5p, or in other words, five thousandths of what he'd hoped he would get for it. I sort of paid him attention but I didn't buy his money.

As he spat I flinched, wondering, how likely was he to have tuberculosis? Spittle as infected litter, I thought—KEEP BRITAIN TIDY. At the same time I was asking myself, was there any circumstance in which a rational person might feel tempted to spend even five pence on a single-sided photocopy of a ten-pound note? I thought: suppose this rational person had an urgent need to make a list—say there was this list but nothing to write it on, and of course the rational person's memory isn't faultless. If a man were to step forwards, wishing, for five pence only, to sell a piece of paper the size of a ten-pound note with, as it happens, printed on the back, the monochromatic image of a tenner, wouldn't the paper, now, seem cheap?

I meandered along the High Street. It was a hot, hot day.

The ten-pound-note man disappeared completely from my mind until a few hours ago.

I don't know how else to put this. My husband was explaining to me that our marriage is defunct. 'It started dying,' he said, 'in my view, pretty much as soon as we tied the knot. But anyway as far as I'm concerned, honestly, for ages it's been pretty much *defunct*.'

We were in our dingy, rental kitchen. We had just had lunch. He said the word 'defunct', and I suddenly felt sick at the smell of sardines, burnt toast and orange peel.

'And by the way, before you ask,' he said, 'I take this to

cover any duty I should maybe feel to the vow, "Till death us do part". I mean I think a kind of death, that's—a kind of death, that's exactly what we're talking about.'

His mother is romantic and named him Constantine, but he's mostly known as Con. And I've mostly thought this funny if I've thought about it at all.

He began his spiel as soon as we'd finished eating: food in, words out. There we were at the table, still with our plates in front of us, orange peel, fiddly skeins of pith, water glasses. He announced that I ought to know it had been a while since he'd thought of himself as my husband.

'That's it, honestly, it's over. Game over. Three years I've really tried but I think you ought to know that it's been a while now since I've thought of myself—'

He shifted in his chair. When I ventured to glance at him he was always staring either at the sink, or a few inches above it out of the window, from which angle the view is of a wall.

'You're impossible and I don't mean to be rude but, someone who doesn't talk, it's pretty much—I don't want you to feel—I mean I've basically had enough.'

He didn't put it like this, didn't use either of the words I'm about to use, but I found he was telling me that in the person of his wife, I have degraded into an autistic vampire.

I admit though, I wasn't fully concentrating. If you think you're about to be sick it's hard to concentrate on anything else—apart, that is, from on *not* being sick.

Near the end he said, 'I'm just tired of feeling responsible for you.'

It came to me that, to Con, my life appears not unlike a black-and-white photocopy of a real life, worth, if approached

in the right spirit, oh, five thousandths of the value I've been imagining for it.

I sat there gazing at my dirty plate, bewildered, shocked and guilty.

It was humid the day the ten-pound-note man tried to interest me in his deal. That evening the weather blew up into a storm, with thunder but no rain. I think the muggy heat plus his wool overcoat may explain why he smelled quite so bad.

Today it's still hot, but it isn't to the same degree oppressive. Given it's meant to be autumn, the temperature must surely drop soon, and then the wind, or a snap frost, will strip a swathe of foliage off the council's spindly, street-improving lime trees.

I have no idea what I'm meant to be thinking, but I find my mind stalls on the fact that I don't earn enough to pay the rent here alone, not to mention needing also to eat. This neighbourhood may be unexalted—it *is* unexalted: a part Victorian, part post-war, dilapidated mish-mash—but it isn't as though the rents round here are the equivalent of, say, a 3p copy machine.

I would like to ask Con about the practical difficulties that arise from the death of our arrangement, but he delivered his speech, murmured his regrets and disappeared. I heard him whip down the first flight of stairs, then abruptly stop and speak to the man who rents below us. They laughed, two doors banged, and that was it.

I suppose not everyone is bewildered the day their marriage ends. I feel shocked but I find I'm not surprised. There's a

moment three fifths of the way through a regulation slasher movie where the second-ranking female character, high-heeled and underclad, flees down an alleyway at night. It's a given that the music will tip the audience the wink that in one of the shaded stairwells up ahead, a man with an axe is coolly waiting to jump out and chop her to bits. When—!*bam*!—he jumps out and chops her to bits, the audience is—!*bam*!—shocked; but not, I think, surprised.

Con's spiel went on and on. It made me feel sick. I have it only in gobbets—'you're impossible', &c., 'game over', '*defunct*', 'I mean I've basically had enough'. One of his lines was to do with how my best next step would be to make my own friends.

He said something, not in these words, like, 'Make your own fucking friends.'

How am I supposed to do this? I don't know. I warm to people who read books. I like the way they sit, hunched over, deliberately deaf. To me the ideal reader looks like someone who, even on a night bus, with only a dim light overhead, and surrounded entirely by drunkards, those drunkards no doubt to include the driver, would be capable of giving off the atmosphere of an aspirant curate wondering just when it became imperative to form a moral judgement.

Con didn't say, in these words, 'Make your own fucking friends.' It was more like: 'I think you need to widen your social circle. I know this may sound feeble but I sometimes get the impression my friends prefer you to me and you can't do everything through me it's just—it's suffocating. I wish you'd get some people of your own. I wish you'd live your

own life and leave mine alone. I've had it. You should get some new friends or something.'

He did also say, 'I expect there are things about *me* that *you* find difficult.' But he didn't pause for breath, and besides, all I could think of that instant was that I hate the way he insists on 100-watt light bulbs.

He used to talk to me, a lot, about music. He'd flit all over the keyboard to illustrate his points. He'd stick the words in any old how, but his playing would be near-continuous. He used to speak to me through music, with a few words in the mix.

Forget 100-watt light bulbs, it would have been something to reply to him that I find it distressing that we don't talk like this any more.

Christ but—an *autistic vampire*? When Dracula first reaches England from Transylvania, his ship puts in at Whitby. If you stand on the south cliff above the little port there, it's striking how the harbour is shaped like a diagram in cross-section of a woman's reproductive organs.

I can't think of anything else to say about vampires.

I'm only partly deaf. For example, I can make out that someone has begun clattering around in the downstairs flat, and I'm hearing this from the top floor of the building. Ours is a flat on two floors, a maisonette.

This word 'maisonette', it strikes me as being superfluous even though I just used it.

As of about a week ago, the maisonette downstairs is being rented by Mr and Mrs Shaw. At least, according to the one letter that's come for them, that's what they're called.

My best bet is that Mr Shaw had a previous wife, lost most of his money divorcing and moved in here with a newer, younger and blonder Mrs Shaw on the promise that when life improves, they'll get a place of their own.

The two of them have been shouting a lot since they arrived. A couple of days ago, when I was still functionally married myself, I said at breakfast, 'I won't be surprised if before you know it those new people downstairs have split up and disappeared again.'

Con replied, 'If they can yell at each other and get it out in the open, I should think that gives them a pretty good chance of being able to beat their problems.'

When I was small, I latched on to the notion that people traumatised by divorce go deaf, and I believed it for a long time, despite all the divorced people I knew being able to hear—not least, in time, my own parents. It's like a bad joke now to think that my own half-deafness has caught up with me at last.

I feel loudly deaf: deaf in my head somehow, not discounting the fact that through the open window I can hear the 3s and 9s round the corner on the High Street, the electric bell of the Minimart pwanging down below next door, people talking on the pavement, Mr and Mrs Shaw bashing about in their flat, even the fitful rustling of air in the lime leaves.

I suppose I've long since loosely understood that there might be a hand holding an axe in a dark stairwell up ahead waiting to leap out and chop my marriage to bits. I didn't think what we had was perfect or anything; and anyway, what would a

perfect marriage be? Robert Browning considered the idea of a perfect marriage distasteful. *Perfection* was distasteful, he thought; although, now I've gone and said that, I find myself coming up with a kind of perfection I'm sure he would have liked.

Some years ago I saw a film about which I remember next to nothing, and no doubt the bit I think I remember differs from what actually happens on celluloid, but that doesn't matter. In the clip as I recall it, a young man is living in poverty in an attic in Paris. Presumably he's French. Day after day he watches for a girl, who, far below him in the street, makes the odd modest purchase at a little food shop opposite his building. She's beautiful—in the circumstances, I forgive her—and he is smitten, of course; but in trying to dream up an inoffensive way to get her to notice him, he grows ill. Minutes pass, and then one day he approaches her as she looks over the vegetables, fruits and whatever else, stacked in crates outside the shop. 'I believe you just dropped this,' he says, and holds out an egg.

I think that, like Rapunzel, or the Lady of Shalott, I could persuade myself right now this minute to suffer my way down and out of my building, ready to blow my life to bits, if I only knew that there was someone waiting in the Minimart to woo me with a perfect lie.

By a 'perfect lie', I mean an undeceitful lie, that is, in its lack of pretence, graced with a peculiar truth.

It's a question, though, whether the love-sick young Frenchman thought to cook his egg first, because, what would it be like to go sloping about the place, in fast-moving crowds, say, with an uncooked egg in one's hand, or, worse still, in

one's trouser pocket? Would a person not become, in such a case, even if painlessly, a kind of cripple?

I talk freely about cripples. I know what it is to be a kind of cripple, so I allow myself to talk freely about cripples; and I don't by this mean the deafness in one of my ears.

I've just watched a four-pigeon pigeon fight. I spend a hopeless amount of time observing the bumbly, cack-toed, mostly failed pigeons that pace the sills and ledges of the minicab office opposite. Lots of pigeons are cripples.

I'm not working, I'm watching pigeon fights, &c. I should be writing a piece for work. I have a deadline at the end of the week. But my marriage collapsed at lunch time, and, although I'm sitting here and could be working, as regards work, I seem to be taking the afternoon off. Inside myself I'm not thinking anything much other than: he's gone. *He's gone*. I don't know where, but, unsurprisingly—sort of unsurprisingly, shockingly—anyway, *out of the blue*, he's gone. He's disappeared. *He's gone*. I wasn't good enough. *He's gone*, &c. &c.

As for Con's line, 'I wish you'd live your own life and leave mine alone'—I feel compelled to mention that at another point in his spiel, he accused me of living entirely inside my own head, and at yet another, of not living any sort of life at all. I think these comments contributed to my remembering the man outside The Admiral with his photocopied ten-pound note.

Con said: 'You have difficulties, I know. I know. I'm not saying you don't. But it isn't a reason to give up. I'm not saying anything, but plenty of people have worse problems than you.'

*

The racket downstairs is hard to interpret. It could almost be that the Shaws are dragging their furniture around. Why do that, though?

For something like a year, Bobbo Stothard lived in that flat. She left three weeks ago to join her elderly sister in Glasgow. Bobbo led me to understand that the ground floor of this building was going to be treated for damp. I therefore wasn't expecting it when replacement tenants moved in.

I liked Bobbo, but she disconcerted me, so I tried to keep out of her way. She belonged to an outfit called the Churches' Circle of Psychical and Spiritual Studies. She had an enormous reserve of anecdotes about other people's encounters with benevolent ghosts, which was fine by me, until—inevitably, I felt afterwards—she one day said, 'I don't talk about it, but I'm a sensitive.' I couldn't bring myself to ask her to elaborate.

The best story she ever told me was not a CCPSS one. It was a moral fable about an event in the life of her governess, Mme Genet. Mme Genet, though Swiss, had been caught up as a child in the Russian revolution. The night at last came when her mother decided that they must escape Moscow. The weather was bitter, the two of them had no food and the political situation was getting worse and worse. They went to bid farewell to a friend, who pressed them to take a bag with a few crusts in it. As little Genet and her mother slunk along the darkened streets, they passed a man leaning against an iron fence, holding forth a cupped hand. Genet's mother said they must give him one of the crusts. Genet protested. How would they ever escape Moscow if they started to give away their food before they'd even begun? Her mother put a crust in the man's hand. The crust fell to the ground because he was dead.

I don't know what I meant when I said that this was a moral fable.

~

Just now I went and lay on the bed and then got up again and came back here. This is a story about Bobbo. The day she was due to leave, and did leave, I made my way downstairs and knocked on her door. 'I'm so sorry I haven't helped,' I said. 'Can I help?'

'You *are* sweet,' she replied, 'but my friends have all rallied and look—see,' she gestured behind her, 'I'm fully packed up, raring to go. But step inside, why don't you? I have some special soaps going begging. I couldn't fit them in. You take them for me.'

I was touched by this, in part because it was so obviously untrue that she would have packed everything she owned save a few bars of soap. She went to fetch them. I didn't step inside.

Their cloying smell caught me off guard. There were three of them, each wrapped in tissue paper with a paper bracelet gummed on top, the bracelets printed with complex coats of arms. I held my awkward haul in my hands and read off to myself, PARFUMEURS DEPUIS *1841*. Bobbo herself repeated a word that sounded something like '*Blomchet*', not written anywhere I could see. I was, as I say, touched. I like the 1840s above any other decade.

'If you don't use them straight away,' she said, 'you can keep them in your undies drawer. Scents them, as it were.' There was a hint of pleasure to the way she added, 'A handy old trick.'

I found myself wondering why Bobbo of all people would

think to perfume her knickers, and at once a fact came into my mind, though I doubt it's really true, that Japanese men, *in industrial numbers*—this vivid phrase also just came to me—like to buy what they believe to be the slightly soiled knickers of adolescent girls, having coin-op machines that dispense them in purpose-made containers, along with condoms, cigarettes or whatever. Without thinking about it, I sighed, causing Bobbo, I saw peripherally, to shrink, as though she took it I had judged her foolish, which indeed, unjustly, I rather had.

So Bobbo left. And now Con has disappeared, *he's gone*, &c. I'm not persuaded the Shaws will last either. When they yell at each other downstairs their words are too muffled to decipher, but the general sound strikes me as harsh and cheerless, not, what?—robustly constructive?

The first time I saw Mr Shaw, he was sitting on the low wall outside our building eating an ice cream. He went about this with the air of someone trying to revivify a frozen breast; that was my impression, and it was so strong I didn't notice much else about him, though I did observe him well enough that he became a recognisable person to me. At the time, I wasn't aware that he had moved in downstairs.

I saw Mr Shaw with his ice cream, and I propped up their one letter against the hall wall the other morning—if they *are* Mr and Mrs Shaw—when I was stepping out, like the Parisian girl in the film, to make a modest purchase at the Minimart. I have also twice now passed them going in and out at the front door, not that I think I'd be able to identify Mrs Shaw in a police line-up. She stared at me and I couldn't really look back.

That's it. The pair of them haven't seemed remotely friendly

during the week of our joint residence here. I suppose neither have I. Another of the reasons Con gave for leaving me was, 'You don't know how to relate to other people.'

It's one thing facts that aren't true, Japanese used-knicker vending machines and so on, but I can state for certain that at some point in the early 1840s, when she was still a child, Christina Rossetti was taken to Madame Tussaud's on a treat that was a total failure. Why? Because she'd been taught that it's rude to stare.

I can only imagine what she'd have thought of having to peer through one-way glass at a police line-up of bogus degenerates. I greatly dislike looking at people I don't know, if they are also looking at me.

It's Saturday. It's hot. I'm supposed to be working. My husband has left me. I haven't got money for the rent. The people downstairs are making a lot of noise. The pigeons can't sit still. I don't want to be thinking, *he's gone*, he's gone, *he's left me*, he's gone—but that's what I keep thinking.

I suppose I could get myself downstairs and buy a paper or something, but I don't want to do that, and besides, if I were to leave the building, I ought to visit my grandmother, Stella Ramble. I go once a week, on Saturdays. Today would be the day.

If ever I repeat the rudest joke bar none in Stella Ramble's one-time repertoire of jokes, I do so in the service of providing historical perspective on humour. Why would a woman in her nineties hate the name Stella? This isn't the joke. Because Stella is the name you give a carthorse when it has a star-shaped blaze on its forehead. That's how old she is: old enough to

be troubled by the incidentals of a culture dependent on carthorses.

I don't like horses. It could be argued that they aren't aware of themselves, but I think they understand very well indeed what they're up to.

What would it be like to fall over underneath a carthorse? More than having an uncooked egg in a trouser pocket, how this would sharpen one's senses: the mild worry about being soaked in a gallon of horse piss; the desperate fear of having your head trampled to a pulp; the smell of the creature so strong and so animal; the uncertainty as to whether an attempt to get out from under it might not provoke an attack you would otherwise have avoided; the horrible thought that it might lie down and suffocate you or fatally fracture your ribs; and all the time the ring and clatter of iron shoes on cobble stones, as the beast, too, grows nervous.

Stella Ramble's worst joke was this: 'One skin, two skin, three skin—oh dear me!' It came coupled with a teetering, concessive laugh.

She didn't confide it to me. She whispered it, at a family gathering some years ago, to my father, Middleton Ramble. She had forced him to promise that he would absolutely never repeat it, but Middleton Ramble didn't scruple to deceive his elderly mother over whether or not he would keep to himself what she'd billed as the rudest joke in the world.

While my grandmother whispered to my father, and let fly with her social laugh, I was at the far end of the table having a chat with Gander Ramble. To be strict, he isn't genuinely a Ramble. He married a great-aunt of mine, now dead, and I give him my family name because I'm fond of him.

It is said on my side of the family that Gander Ramble is related somehow to the fiend who, in a misconceived attempt to get them clean, had the outer patina scoured off the Elgin Marbles. One day, afflicted with a curious sense of shame, I went to the British Museum to look at the result. They're superb.

Gander Ramble, the essence of well-to-do, said to me at the party in question, 'It's unsettling to find oneself the grandfather of a young man who has spent all his working days flat on his back at a garage tinkering with the undersides of cars.'

I was intrigued by this view of things. I wasn't sure I'd ever met the boy, who is, to me, no more than one of several second cousins living in Suffolk. 'I don't know,' I said after a while, 'I suppose a hundred years ago, with a little string-pulling, he could have been tucked into a perfectly respectable job in the city?'

Gander Ramble frowned. 'Gosh no, I don't think so,' he said. Then he added a remark that we both laughed over a lot, though in different registers. 'I rather think that a hundred years ago, he would have spent his working days flat on his back tinkering with the undersides of horses.'

Yes, well.

Stella Ramble likes to assert that she's unshockable. It's an oddly popular stance these days, but I don't believe her.

All the same, given she suffers from dementia and has reached the stage where she has very little short-term memory, it does sometimes cross my mind that I could, without repercussions, put her to the test. For example, I think she might minimally raise an eyebrow at the mysterious story of one of my mother's friends, and the evening gloves she rarely wore. One day this lady, gently genteel, was invited to the opera,

the first invitation of its kind she had received since the death of her husband. She decided to accept, and for once to wear her special gloves. But when she fished them out from the back of the drawer, she found, to her horror, carefully deposited in all ten fingertips, a desiccated ration of shit.

To say the word 'shit' to my grandmother on the thought that she wouldn't remember two minutes later doesn't seem to me excusable.

When she was still herself, Stella Ramble held the reverse position to the one she holds now. She was mortifyingly ready to be shocked. She thought all sorts of things were 'frightfully off', such as owning folding furniture, of any description, even card tables. Items of this nature, she believed, conveyed to the world that one lived without due ease.

At a quick mental inventory, almost every stick of furniture belonging to or used by me and Con either dismantles effortlessly or folds. The very flooring in this place can be taken to bits, as we discovered soon after we moved in, when I spilled lamp oil in the main room downstairs. We got scared about our rental deposit and somehow worked out that we could knife up the stained carpet tile and exchange it for a clean one lifted out from under the non-fire-regulation sofa.

Over time there have been more spills, of candle wax, coffee and the like, and we don't now think twice about swapping the tiles around. A stranger walking in would find that the main room floor, which is of an unnameable dark hue, looks, though mottled, acceptably uniform across its visible expanse. But if that person only knew to check, the sofa floats above a hidden terrain of mismanagement, filth and deceit.

*

I dare say Stella Ramble's joke would disappoint even someone capable of recognising that its entertainment value these days lies solely in how unfunny it is. The concept of lack-of-funniness being occasionally in itself amusing isn't all that outré, but there are perhaps those who would need head exercises to get it.

Further back even than Stella Ramble's far-away youth, there maunders a great supply of Robert Browning jokes:

> 'In the Hub.' Hub Mother (shouting downstairs) — Minerva, are you going to bed? Hub Daughter — Let me have another half hour with Robert, ma. Hub Mother — Another half hour with Robert. Goodness gracious! Have you a man in the house! Hub Daughter — The idea! I'm reading Browning.

This joke also, correctly interpreted, is informatively unfunny, providing a contrast with 'Rules for Reading Browning', from an 1890 issue of the *Boston Globe*, which derives any humour it might have now from the fear that it *wasn't* intended to be amusing:

> You must absorb him through the pores of your soul. Make yourself a sponge, hurl yourself at Browning and soak. Sit down and read a poem whole. Do not try to understand. Do not stop to query in your reading, "What does this mean?" Never mind: read on. Plunge through it in any way, simply calling the words; then re-plunge and re-re-plunge. And, then, when you have re-re-plunged for a considerable length of time, varying from hours to months, according to the perspicacity of your intellect, you begin to see the parts of the poem, the whole in relation to the parts, and the parts in relation to each other.

I know: what kind of maniac collects Robert Browning jokes? I have this compelling sense that when at last I find the right one, I'll understand what the point is.

The pigeons opposite—I worry that one of them is going to end up paralysed on the pavement. It's as though something purposeful is happening over there: gang warfare! insurrection! unarmed revolt!

I'm not sure there has ever been much point to Stella Ramble, but when she still had opinions there was a great deal she was down on. Along with folding furniture, pastels, the Jews and partial nudity, she was more than sniffy about suicides. I need hardly add that, in her readiness to be offended, she was nerve-wrackingly offensive herself.

I suspect, however, that she didn't think her opinions through. I imagine it's more the case that, as a matter of instinct, she reflected back whatever she felt would please those men of her own class upon whom she depended, her long list of dislikes providing, in effect, a glimpse into the soul of the casually superior English gent.

What I'm saying is that her moral gaze was a filmy sort of moonshine.

Forget my work deadline, I should have fitted in visiting her this afternoon, but my marriage folded, and when Con left I just went and lay down. Then I came upstairs to work, which I am not doing, though I sit and write, nevertheless:

A few days ago I was drifting past The Admiral when a man lurched towards me with a black-and-white photocopy of a

ten-pound note. As he spoke he spat. He said, 'Got a couple of fivers?'

I gestured to indicate that I hadn't and felt relieved that it was true.

Here I sit writing—yes—and now it's twilight, and I can smell the heat being given up by the paving stones, tarmac, concrete, brickwork and litter of my street. Evening is in the air, and here I sit.

My mind has repeatedly fallen, all these hours, into a deadening loop: *He's gone*. 'It's over.' *He's left me*. 'Game over. Three years, I've really tried, but—'

At the conclusion of Con's spiel, which was, of course, longer by a long chalk than the speech he gave at our wedding—after he left the flat, after he laughed on the stairs with Mr Shaw and the two doors banged—I stepped through from the kitchen into the main room and went and lay down on the sofa.

What else is there to say except that Stella Ramble, in the old days, would have been unimpressed by the sofa. If you feel like it, you can split it into three easy-chairs, two of them with a single arm, and the third with none.

There was the sofa and I lay down. A few hours passed and I got up again, came up here, started to write, and now I'm exhausted. It's painful for me to sit still for long stretches. At first I lay down for a while. Since then I've been up here sitting.

If I could face it, I would slip out and join the drunkards at The Admiral. Perhaps the ten-pound-note man is in there this minute debating with the landlord, George, the question of whether or not you can pay for a pint with photocopied money.

I'm fairly sure all we have by way of drink in this miserable

maisonette is a single bottle of beer. I intend, shortly, to go downstairs to our laminated rental kitchen, to sit on one of the unstable chairs at the pull-out table and to drink that bottle of beer.

I have friends, I do have friends, *my own fucking friends* I find myself hoping, Beata and Johnson specially, but not only Beata and Johnson, also Pat and Charlie, for example, who are both in the States right now. I also have some family, as who doesn't?

I haven't called anybody because I've never really brought up with anyone about marriage seeming so hard. Plus, I'm worried Con might come back. I'm worried Con will come back, and will tell me his whole spiel was a sort of mistake, and that we should start again, 'make a go of things'—remarks of this kind.

My plan is to give it a week. If I still have no sense of where he is after a week, perhaps then I'll call someone.

That's what I decided while I lay stagnant in the early afternoon above the fouled carpet tiles, on the non-fire-regulation, three-chairs-in-one-sofa sofa.

It's noticeable, and annoying I think, how standard crime films so often provide a victim who is lacking all the many ties that bind a normal human being. When the first vicious steps are taken by the movie's psychopath, does the beautiful heroine—or pathetic cripple heroine—call mother, brother, aunt, confidante, neighbour? Does she call the front-desk liaison officer at the nearest police station? She doesn't. She climbs up into her expensive attic and waits there to be murdered.

About Con, I can say this. I agree with him that there was something wrong from the start. He proposed to me on his knees, and as he did so, I found myself anxiously wishing above any

other thought that he had remained on his feet. I didn't know where to look. I'd have liked to look down, but he was down looking up, so I couldn't, as a result of which, I was left with the panicked feeling that he had missed the point of his proposal.

Con is impulsive. The scene I'm describing took place when he and I had known each other eleven days. It really was the start. We were in a park in cold weather beside an empty bandstand.

I doubt he would have proposed to me if there *had* been music, a brass band or something. Con works on film scores as an orchestrator. He earns his share of our rent, bread and orange peel—the majority share—by helping slant background music to heighten given scenes. Had there been a band that chilly day in the park, some half-cock, out-of-tune military band, perhaps the two of us wouldn't have wound up married.

The minicabs are busy. The pigeons just flew off. The green has drained from the lime trees; they're sodium-vapour grey. People in the street are calling out to each other making plans for the night. How long ago did I think I was about to drink the beer? It's getting late and my bones ache, but at the prospect of a beer I suppose I can shift myself down one floor. I've sat here for ages whittling the hours. Perhaps at last the hours will consent to whittle me, &c.

~

Oh, wow! Seconds after I'd decided to go downstairs anyway there was a loud banging on the door to the flat. I assumed—

I didn't stop to consider anything else—that Con had come home again, and that, although he'd made it into the building, he had somehow lost the key to our place and was banging on the door. Hateful to say, I felt a rush of relief. I got to my feet and, as far as I'm able to, hurried on down to let him in. The banging didn't stop as I hobbled down the stairs, and when I opened the door: wow! There stood Mrs Shaw in an incredible bad temper smelling densely of cigarettes.

The earliest citation in the *OED* for 'wow' dates to 1513: 'Out on thir wanderand spiritis, wow! thow cryis.'

What Mrs Shaw cried was, 'Fucking shitting bastard.' Though her voice was extremely loud, she seemed to be communicating with herself. I noticed obliquely that she's older than I'd thought, by some years older than me. She looked thirty-three? Thirty-three? Maybe thirty-four.

I don't know why I spoke at all, but I said, 'Your husband?'

'My husband?' she growled.

'Oh,' I said.

'Not my husband,' she said. 'Not my husband. Your fucking git of a bastard husband.'

I stepped backwards. When people shout it makes me notice my deafness in a more particular, more unpleasant way.

She clicked past me—she was wearing glinting red high-heels—off the landing lino and onto our carpet tiles. She threw herself down on the sofa. 'I'm not fucking waiting in till one of them gets back,' she said. 'Lock the fucking door. If you've got any blankets, I don't want pneumonia. I've had it up to here. I've truly fucking had it.' She sighed and added, 'What a fucking amateur,' before mumbling, 'All I ever wanted was to be a counter clerk.'

I stood there, thrown, until it came to me that by 'counter', she meant the solid object.

I obediently followed her instructions and bolted the door—against which of our husbands, I still have no idea—then came back upstairs and fetched the lurid pink blanket given to us by Con's mother. When I got downstairs again I had to lay it over Mrs Shaw myself because she'd already closed her eyes. I could tell from her clotted breathing that she was asleep. She'd fallen asleep in two minutes. I sort of flipped the blanket across her. She had her head on a sea-green velvet cushion that I took from Stella Ramble's house. The effect, with her bright blond hair, was beautiful. She, I found, was beautiful—or you might say pretty; worn but pretty—smart even, in a way.

After I'd done the blanket, I went through into the kitchen. It has top-grade, chequer-pattern lino tiles, the best floor in the building. I try to avoid stepping on the pale squares, for no good reason whatsoever. I fetched the beer out of the fridge and came back upstairs again.

Not for the first time today, I feel sick.

I didn't ask her what she meant by 'Your fucking git of a bastard husband', because I didn't want to encourage her shouting, besides which, when she was in the act of saying it, I somehow thought she must be making a mistake.

The word 'amateur', peculiarly, is worse. Amateur what? If she weren't asleep, I might almost ask her that: *Amateur what?*

Now that I'm up here sitting again, I'm no longer tired.

*

I feel unnerved by the thought that Mrs Shaw may shout at me some more in the morning. She made the walls ring. The ten-pound-note man shouted at me, and Mrs Shaw just shouted at me, before which, I'm fairly certain I haven't been shouted at since school.

I wouldn't choose to sleep in our bed tonight if the sofa were free. It's hard to believe that my marriage has ended. Anyway, it turns out the sofa isn't free, so I'm going to go to bed, not that I'm tired, although I am exhausted. There isn't much else to do and I have to work tomorrow, and Con may come home in the morning, I don't know.

I meant, just now, to go to bed. But as I wrote, *and Con may come home in the morning, I don't know*, a stultifying weariness crept over me and pinioned me.

For a while I remained here, absolutely still.

Then, after a while, unable to stop myself, I read through everything I've written today: *Rapunzel*, *Dracula*; 'A tenner for a fiver'; '*defunct*'—wow. Since when? I find myself wondering. 'Make your own fucking friends.' *I warm to people who read books*.

Hey, I think perhaps you dropped this egg.