

Jack-in-the-Box

PAT BLACK

Polygon

First published in 2026 by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

1

Copyright © Paul McGurk, 2026

The right of Paul McGurk to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. This work is reserved from text and data mining (Article 4(3) Directive (EU) 2019/790).

ISBN 978 1 84697 717 6
eBook ISBN 978 1 78885 823 6

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library.

Typeset by 3btype, Edinburgh.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

For Dave Black. No relation. Except he is.

1

Kath had a mother hen moment as Beatrice waved goodbye.

It might have been the falling snow, the leaden skies, or just January in general. A need to stay close to the little one, to keep her safe. Kath remembered her own mother had once declared a snow day, when she was about the same age as Beatrice, without any warning other than a few thick flakes of snow. They'd had a wonderful time away from the school. Tea and toast, and the radio; felt-tip pens and colouring books, and even a cake after lunch. Just for a moment, at the bus stop, Kath had considered doing the same. *Might be nice.*

But the moment was lost for ever upon sight of the bus's yellow and green livery. The little girl in pigtails turned to wave before she hopped up to take the seat beside Jessica, her best friend.

'Have a good day, sweetheart!' Kath cried, loud enough for Beatrice to hear through the glass. Absurdly, she felt on the verge of tears. Beatrice waved and smiled, oblivious.

She'd been jumpy all morning. Ed was gone for a few days – some jolly in Amsterdam: eyebrows raised, uneasy smiles, work, of course – and while she wasn't worried about what he got up to over there, she had a childish habit of not being able to sleep while he was gone. Lights on and everything. Something she'd have scolded Beatrice about. Kath still saw monsters in corners. Unblinking yellow eyes under the bed. She reproved herself for these childish fancies, but she couldn't stop them. As she checked inside the hall cupboard for the second time, she thought, *I'll do this until my dying day.*

There were some odd moments as the morning wore on. The snow had stopped minutes after it started, and it even grew mild outside. Kath decided to give some bedsheets an airing after the washing-machine cycle finished, not liking the fusty smell that hung around house-dried laundry, usually a necessity given the time of year.

She'd been happy to see two foxes playing in the frost-covered wasteground as she pegged out the sheets. But only an hour later, when the blue skies had given way to grey cloud, they were gone. The only warm-blooded life out there was a dirty great crow squatting in one of the trees that obscured the houses backing onto the garden. The wind was bitter, and Kath wondered if more snow was on the way.

Worried that the bedding would freeze with the sharp drop in temperature, she gathered the sheets and spaced them out on the clothes rack in the utility room. They flapped and billowed like grasping hands, and Kath felt a brief panic as the white fabric twisted around her – echoes of ghosts wreathed in sheets with scissored eyes. Jittery as a kitten, she closed the windows, locked the patio doors and then, on an impulse, checked the security cameras monitor. Nothing, of course. Nothing in front of the house, nothing in the garden, nothing in the garage, nothing down the side where the bins lived, in front of the padlocked gate . . .

Kath called her mother on the landline, but there was no reply. Neither the computer's humming solace nor the cosy DJ she favoured after lunchtime could shake that feeling of isolation that came during quiet afternoons alone in the house. The snow was turning to slush on the patio, frosting the trees beyond the fence. Kath didn't want to look too closely. She always imagined that someone might be hiding there.

Despite the ticking of the radiators and the warmth they exuded, she decided to have a bath. *Warm those bones. Nice and cosy.* Her shoulder muscles unbunched at the thought.

Lying back in the intense fog from the churning water,

Kath kept one eye on the bathroom door. No snib lock. Ed had wanted one, but Kath was against it. *What if Beatrice got locked in?*

So, even when the door crept open and the dressing gown hanging from the peg swung towards her, blurred through the shower screen, Kath's mind rationalised the situation. A window left open, surely. A sudden gust of midwinter wind pushing the bathroom door open.

And then the door closed.

Someone was standing there.