The Neighbour

Lisa Gardner

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Neighbour

LISA GARDNER



| CHAPTER ONE |

I've always wondered what people felt in the final few hours of their lives. Did they know something terrible was about to occur? Sense imminent tragedy, hold their loved ones close? Or is it one of those things that simply happens? The mother of four, tucking her kids into bed, worrying about the morning car pool, the laundry she still hasn't done, and the funny noise the furnace is making again, only to catch an eerie creak coming from down the hall. Or the teenage girl, dreaming about her Saturday shopping date with her BFF, only to open her eyes and discover she's no longer alone in her room. Or the father, bolting awake, thinking, What the fuck? *right before the hammer catches him between the eyes.*

In the last six hours of the world as I know it, I feed Ree dinner. Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, topped with pieces of turkey dog. I slice up an apple. She eats the crisp white flesh, leaving behind curving half-smiles of red peel. I tell her the skin holds all the nutrients. She rolls her eyes—four going on fourteen. We already fight over clothing—she likes short skirts, her father and I prefer long dresses, she wants a bikini, we insist she wear a one-piece. I figure it's only a matter of weeks before she demands the keys to the car.

Afterward Ree wants to go "treasure hunting" in the attic. I tell her it's bath time. Shower, actually. We share the old claw-foot tub in the

upstairs bath, as we've been doing since she was a baby. Ree lathers up two Barbies and one princess rubber duckie. I lather up her. By the time we're done, we both smell like lavender and the entire black-and-white checkered bathroom is smothered with steam.

I like the post-shower ritual. We wrap up in giant towels, then make a beeline down the chilly hallway to the Big Bed in Jason's and my room, where we lie down, side by side, arms cocooned, but toes sticking out, lightly touching. Our orange tabby cat, Mr. Smith, jumps on the bed, and peers down at us with his big golden eyes, long tail twitching.

"What was your favorite part of today?" I ask my daughter.

Ree crinkles her nose. "I don't remember."

Mr. Smith moves away from us, finding a nice comfy spot by the headboard, and begins to groom. He knows what's coming next.

"My favorite part was coming home from school and getting a big hug." I'm a teacher. It's Wednesday. Wednesday I get home around four, Jason departs at five. Ree is used to the drill by now. Daddy is daytime, Mommy is nighttime. We didn't want strangers raising our child and we've gotten our wish.

"Can I watch a movie?" Ree asks. Is always asking. She'd live with the DVD player if we let her.

"No movie," I answer lightly. "Tell me about school."

*"A short movie," she counters. Then offers, triumphantly, "*Veggie Tales!"

"No movie," I repeat, untucking an arm long enough to tickle her under the chin. It's nearly eight o'clock and I know she's tired and willful. I'd like to avoid a full tantrum this close to bedtime. "Now tell me about school. What'd you have for snack?"

She frees her own arms and tickles me under my chin. "Carrots!"

"Oh yeah?" More tickling, behind her ear. "Who brought them?"

"Heidi!"

She's trying for my armpits. I deftly block the move. "Art or music?"

"Music!"

"Singing or instrument?"

"Guitar!"

She's got the towel off and pounces on me, tickling anyplace she can find with fast, poky fingers, a last burst of energy before the end-of-the-day collapse. I manage to fend her off, rolling laughing off the edge of

the bed. I land with a thump on the hardwood floor, which makes her giggle harder and Mr. Smith yowl in protest. He scampers out of the room, impatient now for the completion of our evening ritual.

I find a long T-shirt for me, and an Ariel nightgown for her. We brush our teeth together, side by side in front of the oval mirror. Ree likes the synchronized spit. Two stories, one song, and half a Broadway show later, I finally have her tucked into bed with Lil' Bunny clutched in her hands and Mr. Smith curled up next to her feet.

Eight-thirty. Our little house is officially my own. I take up roost at the kitchen counter. Sip tea, grade papers, keep my back to the computer so I won't be tempted. The cat clock Jason got Ree one Christmas meows on the hour. The sound echoes through the two-story 1950s bungalow, making the space feel emptier than it really is.

My feet are cold. It's March in New England, the days still chilly. I should put on socks but I don't feel like getting up.

Nine-fifteen, I make my rounds. Bolt lock on the back door, check the wooden posts jammed into each window frame. Finally, the double bolt on the steel front door. We live in South Boston, in a modest, middle-class neighborhood with tree-lined streets and family-friendly parks. Lots of kids, lots of white picket fences.

I check the locks and reinforce the windows anyway. Both Jason and I have our reasons.

Then I'm standing at the computer again, hands itching by my side. Telling myself it's time to go to bed. Warning myself not to take a seat. Thinking I'm probably going to do it anyway. Just for a minute. Check a few e-mails. What can it hurt?

At the last moment, I find willpower I didn't know I possessed. I turn off the computer instead. Another family policy: The computer must be turned off before going to bed.

A computer is a portal, you know, an entry point into your home. Or maybe you don't know.

Soon enough, you'll understand.

Ten o'clock, I leave the kitchen light on for Jason. He hasn't called, so apparently it's a busy night. That's okay, I tell myself. Busy is busy. It seems we go longer in silence all the time. These things happen. Especially when you have a small child.

I think of February vacation again. The family getaway that was

either the best or the worst thing that happened to us, given your point of view. I want to understand it. Make some sense of my husband, of myself. There are things that once done can't be undone, things that once said can't be unsaid.

I can't fix any of it tonight. In fact, I haven't been able to fix any of it for weeks, which has been starting to fill me with more and more dread. Once, I honestly believed love alone could heal all wounds. Now I know better.

At the top of the stairs, I pause outside Ree's door for my final goodnight check. I carefully crack open the door and peer in. Mr. Smith's golden eyes gaze back at me. He doesn't get up, and I can't blame him: It's a cozy scene, Ree curled in a ball under the pink-and-green flowered covers, sucking her thumb, a tousle of dark curls peeking up from above the sheets. She looks small again, like the baby I swear I had only yesterday, yet somehow it's four years later and she dresses herself and feeds herself and keeps us informed of all the opinions she has on life.

I think I love her.

I think love *is not an adequate word to express the emotion I feel in my chest.*

I close the door very quietly, and I ease into my own bedroom, slipping beneath the blue-and-green wedding quilt.

The door is cracked for Ree. The hallway light on for Jason.

The evening ritual is complete. All is as it should be.

I lie on my side, pillow between my knees, hand splayed on my hip. I am staring at everything and nothing at all. I am thinking that I am tired, and that I've screwed up and that I wish Jason was home and yet I am grateful that he is gone, and that I've got to figure out something except I have no idea what.

I love my child. I love my husband.

I am an idiot.

And I remember something, something I have not thought about for months now. The fragment is not so much a memory as it is a scent: rose petals, crushed, decaying, simmering outside my bedroom window in the Georgia heat. While Mama's voice floats down the darkened hall, "I know something you don't know…."

"*Shhh, shhh, shhh," I whisper now. My hand curves around my*

stomach and I think too much of things I have spent most of my life trying to forget.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," I try again.

And then, a sound from the base of the stairs…

In the last moments of the world as I know it, I wish I could tell you I heard an owl hoot out in the darkness. Or saw a black cat leap over the fence. Or felt the hairs tingle on the nape of my neck.

I wish I could tell you I saw the danger, that I put up one helluva fight. After all, I, of all people, should understand just how easily love can turn to hate, desire to obsession. I, of all people, should have seen it coming.

But I didn't. I honestly didn't.

And God help me, when his face materialized in the shadow of my doorway, my first thought was that he was just as handsome now as when we first met, and that I still wished I could trace the line of his jaw, run my fingers through the waves of his hair.…

Then I thought, looking at what was down at his side, that I mustn't scream. I must protect my daughter, my precious daughter still sleeping down the hall.

He stepped into the room. Raised both of his arms.

I swear to you I didn't make a sound.