The Various Haunts of Men

Susan Hill

One

A Thursday morning in December. Six thirty. Still dark. Foggy. It had been that sort of autumn, mild, damp, lowering to the spirit.

Angela Randall was not afraid of the dark, but driving home at this dreich hour and at the end of a difficult shift, she found the ectoplasmic fog unnerving. In the town centre people were already about but what lights there were seemed distant, small furred islands of amber whose glow gave neither illumination nor comfort.

She drove slowly. It was the cyclists she feared most, appearing suddenly in front of her, out of the darkness and fog, usually without any reflective strips or clothing, quite often even without lights. She was a competent but not a confident driver. The dread, not of crashing into another car, but of running over a cyclist or a pedestrian, was always with her. She had had to steel herself to learn to drive at all. Sometimes, she thought it was the bravest thing she would ever be called upon to do. She knew what horror and shock and grief death in a road accident brought to those still living. She could still hear the sound of the knock on the front door, still see the outline of police helmets through the frosted pane of glass.

She had been fifteen. Now, she was fifty-three. She found it hard to remember her mother alive, well and happy, because those images had been blotted out for ever by that other - of the so loved face, bruised and stitched, and the small, flat body beneath the sheet, in the cold blue-white mortuary light. There had been no one else to identify Elsa Randall. Angela was the next of kin. They had been a close unit and everything to each other. Her father had died before she was a year old. She had no photographs of him. No memories.

At fifteen, she had been left entirely, devastatingly alone, but through the following forty years, she had come to make the best of it. No parents, siblings, aunts or cousins. The idea of an extended family was unimaginable to her.

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Until the last couple of years, she thought she had not only made a pretty good fist of living alone, but that she would never, now, want to do anything else. It was her natural state. She had a few friends, she enjoyed her job, she had taken one Open University degree and had just embarked on a second. Above all, she blessed the day, twelve years ago, that she had at last been able to move out of Bevham, having saved enough to add to the sale of her flat there and buy the small house some twenty miles away in Lafferton.

Lafferton suited her perfectly. It was small, but not too small, had wide, leafy avenues and some pretty Victorian terraces and, in Cathedral Close, fine Georgian houses. The cathedral itself was magnificent - she attended services there from time to time - and there were quality shops, pleasant cafés. Her mother would also have said, with that funny, prim little smile, that Lafferton had 'a nice class of resident'.

Angela Randall felt comfortable in Lafferton, settled, at home. Safe. When she had fallen in love earlier in the year, she had at first been bewildered, a stranger to this forceful, all-consuming emotion, but quickly come to believe that her move to Lafferton had been part of a plan leading up to this culmination. Angela Randall loved with an absorption and a dedication that had taken over her life. Before long, she knew, it would also take over the life of the other. When he accepted her feelings for him, when she was ready to disclose them, when the moment was right.

Until meeting him, her life had begun to seem slightly hollow. Anxiety about future illness, infirmity, old age, had crept up to the edges of her consciousness, grinned at her. It had shocked her when she had arrived at an age her mother had never been. She felt that she had no right to it. But since that meeting in April, the hollowness had been replaced by an intense and passionate certainty, a conviction of destiny. She no longer gave loneliness, old age and illness a thought. She had been rescued. And after all, fifty-three was not sixty-three or seventy-three, it was the prime of life. At fifty, her mother had been on the edge of old age. Everyone was younger now.

As she left the protecting walls of the town centre, the fog and darkness closed in around the car. She turned down the road oddly called simply Domesday, and left into Devonshire Drive. A few lights were on in the bedroom windows of the large detached houses, but she could only just make them out through the fog. She slowed to twenty and then down to fifteen miles an hour.

Impossible to see in such weather that this was one of the most attractive and sought-after parts of Lafferton. She knew how lucky she had been to find the small house in

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Barn Close, one of only five houses there, at a price she could just afford. It had been empty for over a year, following the death of the elderly couple who had lived in it for over sixty years. It had not been a close then, and very few of the imposing houses on Devonshire Drive had existed either.

The house had been completely unmodernised and in a state of some disrepair, but as soon as she had stepped inside it for the first time, behind the young estate agent, Angela Randall had wanted to live there.

'I'm afraid it needs an awful lot doing to it.'

But none of that had mattered at all, because the house had embraced her at once, in a very particular way.

'People have been happy here,' she had said.

The girl had given her an odd look.

'I want to make an offer for it.'

She had walked into the chilly little eau-de-nil-painted kitchen, with its cream gas cooker and brown varnished cupboards, and seen past them, out of the window to the field over the hedge and, rising behind it, the Hill. The clouds had been chasing the sun across it, teasing, making the green slopes now bright, now dark, like children playing.

For the first time since the knock on the door had come all those years ago, Angela Randall had felt what she recognised after a moment as happiness.

Her eyes were sore, with tiredness and the strain of peering through the windscreen into the streaming fog. It had been a difficult night. Sometimes the old people were

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quite settled and peaceful and there was rarely a call. They just checked round every couple of hours, and did any linen sorting and other routine jobs that were left for them by the day staff. She had been able to do a lot of her degree coursework in the staffroom of the care home, on nights like that. But on this last her books had scarcely been opened. Five of the residents, including some of the frailest and most vulnerable, had gone down with an acute sickness virus, and at two o'clock they had had to call out Dr Deerbon, who had sent one old lady straight into hospital. Mr Gantley's tablets had had to be changed, and the new prescription gave him nightmares, wild, terrifying, screaming nightmares which woke those in the rooms on either side of him in fright. Miss Parkinson had walked in her sleep again and managed to reach the front door, unlock and unbolt it and get halfway down the path before any of them, frantic with sickness everywhere else, had realised. Dementia was not pretty. The best anyone could do was damage limitation and safe confinement, as well, of course, as provide clean, bright surroundings, decent food and friendly care. She wondered how she would have coped if her mother had lived to suffer with an illness that robbed people of their very selves - personality, memory, spirit, dignity, the ability to relate to others - everything that made life worth living, rich and valuable. 'You'll take me in here, won't you,' she had more than once joked to Carol Ashton, who ran the Four Ways Home, 'if I ever get that way?' They had laughed it off and talked of something else, but Angela's questioning had been like that of a child seeking reassurance and protection. Well, she had no need to worry about any of that now. She would not grow old alone, whatever her condition. She knew that.

As she reached the end of Devonshire Drive, the fog thinned and changed from a dense bank to thinner skeins and veils which wound themselves about in front of the car. There were now patches of darkness through which house and street lights shone out clear orange and gold. Turning into Barn Close, Angela Randall could make out her own white-painted gate at the far end. She let out a long sigh, releasing the tension in her neck and shoulders. Her hands were damp on the steering wheel. But she was home. She had a long sleep and a four-day break ahead.

Outside the car she could taste the fog like damp cobwebs across her skin but from the Hill a slight breeze was blowing towards her. Perhaps by the time it broke light and she was ready to go out again, it would have dispersed the last of the fog. She was tireder than usual, after the bad night and such an unpleasant drive, but it would not have occurred to her to change her routine. Angela Randall was an orderly woman, of regular habit. Only one thing had happened recently to break into the safe cocoon she had built around herself and threaten disorder and chaos, but the potential disorder and the chaos were sweet and, to her own surprise, she had welcomed them.

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Nevertheless, for the present she kept to her routine, and in any case, if she missed her run even for a day she noticed the difference the next time she went out, felt just a little less supple, breathed slightly less easily. The doctor had told her that she should take up a sport, and she trusted him completely. If he had told her to hang upside down from the branch of a tree for a week, she would have done so. But no sport appealed to her, so she had started running - walking at first, followed by jogging, working up in speed and distance to a daily three-mile run.

'A balanced life,' he had said when she had told him that she was also starting her next Open University degree. 'Take care of both mind and body. Old-fashioned advice but none the worse for that.'

She went into her tidy, spotless house. The carpets, an indulgence for which she had saved carefully, were thick and close-fitted. When she shut the front door, there was the silence she so enjoyed, a soft, deep silence, padded, comforting.

Nothing was out of place. In a sense, this house had been her life and more to her, until recently, than any family, any human being or pet could ever have been. It was reassuringly as she had left it the previous evening. There was no one to rearrange anything. Angela Randall relied on 4 Barn Close and it had never failed her.

During the next hour, she ate a banana chopped into a small bowl of muesli and drank a single cup of tea. An egg on toast, with a rasher of lean bacon, tomatoes and more tea would come later, after her run. Now, she set out the food under a cover, the pan, loaf and butter, refilled the kettle, and emptied and rinsed the teapot. Everything was set ready for later, after the run and her shower.

She listened to the news on the radio and read the front page of the newspaper the boy had just delivered, then went upstairs to her pale blue bedroom, changed out of her uniform and dropped it into the laundry basket and put on a clean, freshly ironed white T-shirt and pale grey tracksuit, white socks and running shoes. Her hair was brushed and pulled off her face in a white elastic headband. She put three wrapped glucose sweets into her pocket and the spare front-door key on a ribbon round her neck underneath her tracksuit top.

As she closed the front door behind her, more lights were coming on in the houses and a thin, sour, bleak dawn was breaking over the Hill. The fog still hung about,

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wreathing among the trees and bushes on the slopes, swirling, thickening, then shifting and clearing again.

But curtains were not yet drawn. No one looked out, keen to begin the day, to see what was going on or who was about. It was not that sort of morning. At the corner of Barn Close, a few yards from her own house, and at the beginning of the path leading to the field, Angela Randall broke into a light jog. A few minutes later, she was running, steadily, purposefully and quite unobserved, across the open green and on to the Hill and, after only a few yards, into a sudden bolster of muffling, dense, clammy fog.

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