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Opening Extract from...

Mr Chartwell

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Wednesday 22 July 1964

I

5.30 a.m.

Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill's mouth was pursed as if he had a slice of lemon hidden in there. Now eighty-nine, he often woke early. Grey dawn appeared in a crack between the curtains, amassing the strength to invade. Churchill prepared himself for the day ahead, his mind putting out analytical fingers and then coming at the day in a fist, ready for it.

A view of the Weald of Kent stretched beyond the window, lying under an animal skin of mist. Bordered to the west by Crockham Hill and to the east by Toys Hill, Churchill's red-brick house sat in a shallow coomb, enclosed by a horseshoe of ancient forest that opened in a long, green horizon to the south.

Although fully awake, Churchill's eyes remained closed. On his back, the bedcovers pulled and folded at his waist, he lay with his arms alongside the quilted log of his body. On the other side of the house, Clementine lay sleeping in her four-poster bed. He thought of his wife, wishing to be with her.

But Churchill wasn't alone in his bedroom; something else in the dark, a mute bulk in the corner, a massive thing, was watching him with tortured concentration.

Churchill was aware of its presence. He didn't need to see or hear it to know it was there; he had more of a sense, an instinctual certainty when it appeared. Its eyes pressed on him hotly, imploring him to wake up. It willed him to move. After hours of waiting it ached with the desire to explode from the corner and shake him.

Churchill spoke in a barely audible whisper, not that it mattered – he knew the thing would be listening.

'Bugger off.'

There was a long silence as the thing scrabbled to compose itself. Churchill could feel it grinning filthily in the blackness. It said with unsuppressed relish, '*No*.'

2

8.30 a.m.

In a terraced house in Battersea, Esther Hammerhans came tearing down the stairs with one arm through a cardigan sleeve, the rest flapping at her legs, and turned off the hob. The kettle stopped its screaming and threw out hysterical clouds of steam. Esther found the teapot and filled it with hot water, some spilling over the work surface. The tea leaves had been forgotten, something she discovered five minutes later, after a wild campaign with the washing up. 'Idiots!' she cursed the tea leaves, beating them into the water with a spoon.

Then she put on the entire cardigan. This seemed a good step, a positive move. A moment passed where she calmed herself; it was important to look calm. Mr Chartwell would arrive at any minute; it was important that the first impression was a good one. She admired the yellow cabinet doors and drawers which she had scrubbed earlier, the walls painted a paler yellow and lit with a fluorescent tube on the ceiling. The dark orange tiled floor had been mopped, pots of spices and dried herbs arranged neatly on wiped white gloss shelves. The blue Formica-topped kitchen table was arranged with a vase of flowers, a stainless steel candlestick there for show as if she used it every day. Sugar cubes were stacked into the only small bowl without chips. A tasteless bowl designed to resemble a cockerel; Esther had hidden the cockerel-head lid in a drawer.

Esther went to the mirror hung near the window and examined herself, seeing a wispy, long-haired person with a delicate underbite.

She had always been slim, slimmer now and a bit bare with it. The mirror returned a smile which expressed fatigue, a varnish of melancholy painted behind the features. The general package, Esther decided, would not benefit from further examination.

The boxroom she wanted to rent didn't have many things but it did have a garden view. Light mobbed every crevice from the first gloss of daybreak, and this would flaunt the room's extreme cleanliness. The carpet, meticulously hoovered, had come up well and showed its brilliant ochre colour, the colour of a toy lion. A decorative earthenware tile hung on the wall above the bed – a painted scene of a hillside village in Greece, the white cottages whirling with violently green and orange foliage, thick black lines everywhere as if drawn with a thumb. Her friend Beth had loaned her a single bed, a very modest and old bed which didn't look so humble when dressed with fresh sheets and blankets. The light bulb was decorated with a woven wicker shade, purchased last week, which Esther felt gave the room a sense of style. A new wardrobe completed the room's transformation into a bedroom. If necessary she would throw in the occasional use of her car.

But – disappointment – only one note of interest had answered her advert, silently hand-delivered yesterday evening from a Mr Chartwell requesting a viewing in the morning. The lettering was savage and strange, pressed so hard into the paper the commas were torn through. It seemed to Esther this note had been written by someone deeply unfamiliar with a pen, someone who held it like a pole they wanted to bang into the ground. Finding the note, Esther had creased it in a fist, stunned suddenly at the idea of sharing her home, the thought of the intrusion making her gently seasick.

Maybe, thought Esther, now in the front room at the record player, she should put some music on to insinuate that she was a hip landlady as well as a calm one. Mr Chartwell was probably a music fan; he would appreciate the charts. The Rolling Stones were number one

with 'It's All Over Now', and Esther had bought the single. She busied herself with this task, supremely confident. Placing the needle on the record, the song blared at an obscene volume, Mick Jagger's voice screaming through the tissues of her head. Esther snatched the needle off.

The music was abandoned and silence restored. Then, just as quickly, it was overthrown.

The doorbell buzzed. In the kitchen, Esther stood motionless, feeling the hoof-kick of nerves. A few seconds passed. The doorbell called again.

'Right, here we go, I suppose,' she said to a photograph of Michael on the windowsill. That funny chin angled left, broad-shouldered in a blue denim shirt, the top two buttons undone. His big face was captured in a moment of serenity, grey eyes trained on something beyond the sights of the camera. Esther imagined what he would say to her and then his voice was in her ears, summoned from a library of memories, talking as if through a seashell. He made a few comments, all practical. His words were encouraging so she stayed there, listening. *I miss you*, Esther said to Michael. He whispered something, a hand on her cheek. Then the doorbell issued its instructions with new ferocity. Michael clicked off. Esther went to let Mr Chartwell in.

The first thing she noticed was that Mr Chartwell was a colossal man. He filled the porch with the silhouette of a mattress, darkening the pane of frosted glass. As she walked towards the front door a weird odour developed and intensified, emanating from the doorway. It smelt like an ancient thing that had been kept permanently damp; a smell of cave soil.

Esther's instincts transmitted high-frequency pulses of intuitive information. They told her that someone odd and kinky awaited her, someone with a rare kinkiness that rode off the spectrum. They told her to hide. But hide where? There was nothing in the hallway to

dive behind, it was a wasteland. And what about their appointment? Her dutiful feet pushed forwards.

Opening the door was as violently traumatic as anything could conceivably be, the shock of it blasting out like a klaxon. Esther mashed herself against the wall. She watched with billboard eyes and didn't move.

Mr Chartwell's black lips carved a cordial smile. 'Mrs Esther Hammerhans?' He extended a paw the size of a turnip. 'Hello, I've come about the room.'