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Opening Extract from...

Even the Dogs

Written by Jon McGregor

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to Alice

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one

They break down the door at the end of December and carry the body away.

The air is cold and vice-like, the sky a scouring steel-eyed blue, the trees bleached bone-white in the frosted light of the sun. We stand in a huddle by the bolted door.

The street looks quiet, from here. Steam billows and sighs from a central-heating flue. A television flickers in a room next door. Someone hammers at a fencing post on the far side of the playing fields behind the flats.

An overflow pipe with a fat lip of melting ice drips on to the walkway from three floors up, the water pooling and freezing in the shade of a low brick wall.

Cars drive past, from time to time, their windows fogged and their engines straining against the cold.

We see someone getting out of a taxi parked further up the hill. She leaves the door open, and we see two carrier bags stuffed full of clothes and books and make-up on the back seat. She comes up the short flight of steps, and bangs on the door. This is Laura. She shouts through the letterbox. She gestures for the taxi-driver to wait, and goes round to the side of the building. We see her climbing on to a garage roof and in through the kitchen window of the flat. She stands in the kitchen for a few moments. She looks like she's talking to someone. She climbs out again, drops down from the garage roof, and gets back into the taxi.

Later, in the evening of the same day or the day after that, with the other flats glowing yellow and blue from behind thin curtains and pinned-up sheets, we see Mike scrambling up on to the garage roof. We hear shouting, and something being broken. We see Ben, running down the hill towards town.

We see Heather, another morning, hauling herself up the steps and banging on the door, an opened can in one hand. She shouts through the letterbox and looks through the glass. The old woman from the flat next door comes out and says something. They argue, and Heather bangs on the door again before walking off down the hill towards town.

We see Mike, talking on his phone, his long coat flapping around his knees as he strides out into the road.

The streetlamps come on, slowly, glowing red and then orange and then flickering out again as the dawn unfurls. Frost forms across the playing fields and the grass verges, and is smudged by footprints and tyres and the weak light of the distant sun. Time seems to pass.

We see Danny, running across the playing fields with Einstein limping along behind him. We peer round the corner of the flats and see him climbing on to the roof of the garages. Einstein looks up, barking and scrabbling at the garage door, and we hear the creak of a window being opened.

The old man in the wheelchair appears. We know him but we don't know his name. He's not even that old but it's something to call him. He inches along the pavement, gripping the wheels with hands wrapped in rags and unravelling gloves, his face twisting with the effort of each small push. Grunting faintly as he goes. Huh. Hah. Huh. He glances towards us but he doesn't stop. Huh. Hah. Huh.

The window opens again, and we see Danny jumping from the roof of the garages, falling, landing awkwardly and

stumbling when he tries to get up. He picks up his bag and his blankets and he hurries away down the road towards town, passing the old man in the wheelchair and calling Einstein to follow him, his blankets slung over his shoulder and trailing along the ground and he doesn't look behind him as he goes.

It gets dark, and light, and dark again, and we wonder whether anyone else will come. There are more of us now, and we stand in silence by the door, looking up and down the road.

There's no siren when the police finally arrive. They drive slowly up the hill, peering out from the window at the numbered street signs. They pull over at the bottom of the steps and sit there for a few moments with the engine running, talking on their radios.

Someone looks out of a window on the second floor and turns away, pulling the curtains closed.

The front door of the next flat along opens slightly.

The two policemen get out of the car, rubbing their gloved hands together, squinting against the cold and the low late-afternoon sun. One of them, a young-looking man with pale blue eyes and a thin nose, goes to the boot and takes out a pair of long torches. They walk carefully up to the flat, avoiding the ice creeping down the steps, and we move away from the door. Their breath clouds around their faces and trails off into the air.

The door of the next flat opens further, and an old woman appears. She watches the two men shine their torches through the glass panels of the front door and shout through the letterbox. She's wearing a checked dressing gown, and a pair of slippers in the shape of tiger's paws. She says something to them, folding her arms. The younger policeman turns to her and nods, and when she says something more they ignore her.

A car slows as it passes, stopping for a moment and then driving on.

What took them so long. Where were they.

They test the door with their shoulders, and then the younger policeman steps back and kicks at the lock. The door falls open. They both move forward, and turn away again, covering their noses and mouths. They look at each other, and lift their torches to shine a narrow light into the flat's dark hall. The old woman shuffles closer, hugging her arms a little tighter around her chest, and we look past her into the torchlit gloom. The place is a mess, but we knew that already. The walls are scribbled-over and stained, bare wires hanging from the rotten plaster. The floor is covered with bottles and cans and blankets and clothes, a pile of car tyres, shards of glass. And there must be a foul smell, the two men's hands still pressed over their noses and mouths and their faces still half turned away. The younger man coughs, as though something is sticking in the back of his throat. The older man puts a hand to his colleague's arm, speaking quietly.

They don't see us, as we crowd and push around them. Of course they don't. How could they. But we're used to that. We've been used to that for a long time, even before. Before this.

Their boots crunch and snap on the debris-covered floor. They walk slowly, and they let the light of their torches lead the way. They call out, something like Hello, police, hello. They glance at each other, and they move further into the flat.

The younger man, turning right at the end of the hall where his colleague has turned left, finds the body lying on the sitting room floor. He looks for no more than a second or two, his eyes widening, and then he calls out, backing away, clamping his fist over his mouth. The older man comes through from the kitchen, his feet grinding across more broken glass as he steps past into the sitting room and sees what's there. He flinches slightly, and nods. He shines a torch over the body, the damp clothes, the broken and blistered flesh. He points out something that looks like blood, puddled across the lino, a trail of it leading into the kitchen. The younger man, still standing in the doorway, speaks into his radio, asking for something. They don't speak. They wait. They look at the body. We all crowd into the room and look at the body. The swollen and softening skin, the sunken gaze, the oily pool of fluids spreading across the floor. The twitch and crawl of newly hatched life, feeding.

It's Robert. But we knew that already.

The sky is darkening outside, a faint red smudge along the treeline by the river, the clouds stretching low and thin towards the ground.

The older policeman tugs at his shirt collar, pulling his tie

away from his neck, muttering something to his colleague as he pushes past, leading the way down the cluttered hallway and out into the cold clean air.

Outside, the woman with the tiger-paw slippers and the checked dressing gown is waiting. She asks something, and they hold up their hands and shake their heads. The older man fetches a roll of blue and white tape from the car and cordons off the area around the door. The woman watches them, chewing the inside of her lip. Her skin is dry and loose on her face, gathered in small folds around her jaw. She talks to the younger policeman for a few moments, shaking her head, peering past him towards the open door. She turns, and shuffles back to her flat.

The two men stand in front of the cordon. A fluorescent light on the wall above them buzzes faintly as it warms up. Lights flicker on along the walkway, a few at a time. The sky darkens to a bruised purple. The men stamp their feet and rub their hands to keep away the cold, and they talk. We look up and down the street, and Danny tells us what it was like when he found him, when he climbed in through the window at the back of the flat and found Robert laid out on the floor.

Penny standing in the doorway, shivering and looking up while Danny climbed in through the kitchen window and jumped down on the floor. Didn't see her at first, and when he did he couldn't understand why she weren't yapping like usual, why she was standing so still. Just like trembling and that. Knew something was wrong straight off, it was too quiet. Never been quiet like that before. Always been Penny and the other dogs barking and music playing and people shouting to make themselves heard. Penny didn't even turn when he went past. Didn't have the strength. Bag of bones. Just stood there and Danny

come rushing back out the room and puked on the floor before climbing straight out the window and he didn't look back.

Three more vehicles pull up outside the flat. This is later. The woman with the tiger-paw slippers has brought the men two mugs of tea, asked questions they decline to answer, and taken the empty mugs away. A group of children have gathered by the flat, trying to see past the policemen and into the hallway, trying to duck under the cordon. But they're gone now, and it's quiet. A man and a woman get out of the first vehicle and carry cases of equipment up the steps, talking to the policemen while they climb into rustling white overalls and pull on clear plastic gloves. A woman in jeans and a long grey coat comes up the steps, carrying a small leather bag. Two men take lights and tripods from the back of another van and stack them at the top of the steps. They all take a pair of plastic foot-covers from a box, balancing on one leg and then the other to slip the elasticated cuffs over their shoes while the younger policeman writes their names in a logbook, their breaths steaming above them and yellowing in the fluorescent light.

The woman with the small leather bag goes into the flat, through the hall and into the room where Robert's body lies. She crouches beside him, touching his cold skin, noting the sunken eyes and swollen lips, the insects, the weeping blisters up and down his body. She nods, checking her watch and writing something in a hardback notebook or diary, telling the policeman what time to write in his notes as she leaves, ducking under the cordon, peeling off her gloves and walking quickly down the steps to her car. She puts her bag down on the passenger seat and turns on the radio. She looks at her mobile phone, a blue glow

shining on her face, and then she puts it back in her bag and drives away.

The men with the lights go inside and set them up against the walls, keeping well away from the body, connecting the battery packs and the clamps, and suddenly the room is huge with light, with a bright white light which erupts out of each corner and fixes every wriggling detail into place. The man and woman in white overalls come into the room, joined by another man with a thick tangle of dark hair who looks like he might be in charge. The first man takes photographs while the woman looks carefully over the body, pulling Robert's clothes away from his neck, combing her gloved fingers through his hair and picking through the mess on the floor. She shows the photographer the dark bloodstains trailing across the lino. The younger policeman stands in the hallway, watching, and the man with the dark tangled hair asks him questions. He shakes his head, gesturing towards the front door, smiling briefly at some comment made by the photographer, and for a moment the room feels crowded again, crowded like it was the last time we were all here together with Robert stretched out on the floor the way he always was by the end of the night, with that look on his face he only ever got when he was sleeping. And there he is, snoring, spluttering, reaching out a hand behind his head like he's looking for something to hold on to. One of us, Heather probably, leaning forward to pull his coat more snugly across his broad chest, his shoulders, tucking his hat back on to his head until she sees the rest of us watching. The rest of us sleeping. Danny and Ben and Laura and Mike and Ant and whoever else happened to be around. Or not quite sleeping but closing our eyes and listening to the music coming from the taped-up stereo in the kitchen, some broken-beated lullaby holding us up against the walls

and against each other, while our hands fall open and spill the spoons and pipes and empty cans, the scraps of foil and paper and cotton wool. Our crumbs of comfort scattering across the floor. Our open hands.

A phone rings, and the policeman standing by the door pulls it from his pocket, gesturing to the others before ducking out of the room to speak, out through the ruined hallway and the battered front door, and as the door closes behind him we see Robert, and Yvonne, working back to back as they take down the old wallpaper, peeling and picking at it with a paint-scraper and a knife, small curls and flakes falling to the floor like confetti. Sitting by the open front door to eat ham and tomato sandwiches and watch children run up and down the steps. Hanging the new paper over the torn remains of the old, measuring and cutting and pasting, the afternoon passing away while they talk or don't talk or sing along with the radio, and by teatime the last corner of paper is finally smoothed into place, the aching in their arms and their necks rushing up on them both as they stand back to look at their work, their hands sticky with wallpaper paste and sweat.

We never met Yvonne but we see her now. We see things differently now. We see them clearing away the traces of whoever had lived there before, painting and papering over the cracks. Throwing out the things left behind, the stacked magazines and hoarded tins, the rusted mousetraps in the cupboard under the sink. The simple acts of two people making a home together. Bringing new furniture in through the narrow doorway: a bed, an armchair, a sofa, a chest of drawers. Adjusting to each other's presence, each other's movements in the small spaces of their lives. The way he paces and stretches, the way she curls into the chair, the sound of their footsteps, the particular smells of their

bodies mingling and filling the air. And now she asks him something, rubbing strings of drying paste from her hands and blowing the hair from her eyes. He looks up, smiling, as she pushes the door closed behind her, as she pulls her t-shirt over her head and unclips her bra. They kiss quickly, pressing together, fumbling for buttons and zips, and we back away into the sitting room, with its freshly painted walls and its picture window looking out over the playing fields, the newly planted trees, the river beyond. We can hear the two of them gasping and whispering against the rattling front door. We can see into the main bedroom, and we can see the double bed squeezed up against the wardrobe, the two sleeping bags zipped together on the bare mattress, the overspilling ashtray and the clothes piled up everywhere, and when we turn back into the sitting room we see the photographer laying metre-sticks out beside the body on the floor. Taking more notes, and asking questions of the policeman who's come back in from outside. One of the men with the lights notices Penny, finally, her head wedged between her front paws and her ears folded flat against her neck. Her small brown body cold and stiff. The older policeman says something from the front doorway, and they follow his directions into the kitchen as Robert comes back from the street with a pile of steaming chips doused in vinegar which he and Yvonne eat straight from the wrapping, wiping their sticky hands on their clothes before finishing the clearing up and undressing again and squeezing into an overflowing bath where they soap each other's tired bodies and their genes collide inside her.

They sit there, in the bath, the mirror clouding over with steam and the tap dripping quietly into the still water, and we watch the new wallpaper begin to fade. Sunlight comes in through the kitchen window and the open kitchen door,

falls against the striped pattern at the far end of the hall, and bleaches the colour away. The front door blows open, and exhaust fumes from the road drift in and brush against the walls, leaving fine layers of dirt stuck to the traces of grease left by trailing hands.

They top up the bath water, the plunging gush of it suddenly loud in the small hushed room. They're quiet now, warm-blooded and sleepy, the spring air drifting in through the open window and bringing with it the sounds of children being called home for bed, and music, and the faint shouts of football games on the playing fields. He dangles his feet over the end of the bath, and she leans her head against his ankles, and they both close their eyes.

The steam from the bath curls out into the hallway, easing the wallpaper away from the wall. Peppered spores of mould thicken and spread towards the ceiling. Rainwater seeps through the worn pointing on the front of the building and pushes through the plaster, the damp spreading outwards like an old bruise. The varnish on the doorframe cracks as the timber swells and softens and gradually rots away.

Later, when the water has cooled again, she stands up, awkwardly, the water streaming down her changed body and splashing into the bath. Her breasts are rounder now, heavier, and her stomach is swollen, her skin stretched taut. She grabs the edge of the sink as she climbs out, and presses a hand against the painful curve of her spine. He takes a towel from the hook on the door and wraps it round her body, holding out his arm to support her weight while she carefully pats herself dry.

Crayon scribbles appear, low on the wallpaper by the heaps of shoes and boxes of toys. Dated felt-tip stripes creep up the wall by the doorframe, tracking their daughter's growth a thumb's width at a time. Tiny shoes nudge in amongst the adult-sized ones, and bigger shoes take their place. Tea-stains the colour of old photographs splash across the wall, lingering long after the broken cups are cleared away. A dent

the size of a fist or a forehead is hidden by a framed school portrait. The damp patches spread further, and the paper sags away from the wall, and the ceiling stains a darkening nicotine yellow. The door is kicked from its hinges, and rehung. More framed pictures are put up on the wall.

They scoop their daughter from the bath. This is Laura, we realise. They carry her from the room in the snug white wrap of a towel, chatting happily and playing with her mother's hair. He leans down and kisses her damp forehead, breathing in the soapy smell of her, and he watches as his wife carries her into the small bedroom and puts her to bed, and he fetches a bottle of whisky from beneath the kitchen sink.

In the bathroom, dark lines of mould creep along the grouting between the tiles, and the tiles crack and fall away from the wall. The sink is pulled from its fixings and breaks in two, the cracked pipes spilling water across the floor until they're capped and disconnected. The toilet stops flushing, blocks, and overflows, and the sludgy water pools in the corner of the room where the floor slopes down a little. The mirror above the sink is smashed into pieces.

In the kitchen, the man and woman in white overalls shine their torches around the room and push at the window. It swings open, creaking against the frame. They lean forward, seeing how large the gap is, looking out at the garage roof below. They look at the bloodstains in the sink, and take samples. They write things down in their notebooks, they take photographs, they shine their torches carefully across the surface of the worktop and the floor.

When they come back into the sitting room there are two more of them, wearing black suits and black shoes sheathed in plastic foot-covers. They tape plastic bags over Robert's hands and head, wrap his whole body in a plastic sheet, and

squeeze him into a thick white plastic bag. It takes four of them to get him into the bag, and one of them seems to make a joke about it. They seal the zip with a numbered lock. They lift him on to a stretcher, awkwardly, and it takes six of them to carry him out to the waiting van.

The photographer stays behind and takes pictures of the room without him in it. The empty space on the floor, which seems enormous now. The marks and stains around where he lay. His hat, which must have slipped from his head when he fell.

The two men who set up the lights stand in the hallway, talking quietly, waiting for the photographer to finish. He nods at them as he leaves, and they turn off the lights, the older policeman shining his torch while they pack the equipment away. The hot bulbs glow faintly for a few moments, and they carry everything else out to the van while they wait for the last ebb of light to cool.

We stand together in the hallway, uncertainly. We can hear the two policemen talking outside, the crackle and mutter of their radios. We can hear footsteps moving around upstairs, and somebody laughing. We can hear, faintly, Robert and Yvonne in the bath, splashing each other, asking for the soap. But when we look, there's no one there, and the tiles are still cracked, fallen into the empty bath, and the sink has still been pulled from the wall. The hooks on the back of the door have been ripped out. The door to the small bedroom has been kicked from its hinges and propped against the wall. The framed pictures have been taken down, the glass smashed on the floor and the photographs torn into small fluttering pieces, each brighter square of wallpaper cratered by a fist-sized hole. Wine bottles have been broken against the doorframes, bleeding long red stains down the walls. The lino tiles have been studded with cigarette burns, and half of them peeled up off the floor. People have come and gone, and come and stayed, and left their rubbish piled up in the hall. We wait, not looking at one another, not sure what to do

next. One or two of us leave, perhaps to go with him. Time seems to pass. We can hear them in the bathroom still, the tap dripping into the water, the low static murmur of their voices.

Outside, it gets lighter, and darker, and as the sky begins to lighten again behind the curtains in Laura's room her mother creeps in and sits on her bed. We watch as she brushes the hair from her sleeping daughter's eyes. Laura wakes up, and frowns. Her mother puts a finger to her lips, reaching under the bed to pull out a bag she packed with clothes and money the night before, and while Laura gets dressed she gathers a few of her books and toys and stuffs those in as well. Laura crouches on the floor to pull on her shoes, and then the two of them slip from the room and out of the flat, closing the front door with an almost inaudible squeeze and click, and then the two of them are gone. The morning's light begins to filter through the thin orange curtains, and the shallow impression of Laura's body on her mattress slowly fades. The scent of her lingers in the hollow fibres of the rumpled pillow, and in the turned-back duvet, and in the vests and pants and t-shirts which spill in bitter fistfuls from her drawers. The book she was being read is left unfinished, broken-backed on the floor. Dust settles. And then the two of them are gone.

He wakes up. Robert, this is. He wakes up, and every day it seems as though they've only just left. He wakes with a jolt, as if at the sound of the softly closing door, and remembers that the two of them are gone.

The room is suddenly much darker. We sink to the floor. The view from the window is clouded by an unfamiliar condensation on the glass. The heat from the lights and the voices and the bodies of the men and women who have been in the room takes a few hours to fade. As it does so, and as the whole flat begins to cool, the condensation hardens into thin tracings of ice, and splinters of light from the dawn outside crack slowly into the room.

We get up, and we leave the flat. We're not sure what else we can do. In the street, the men slide Robert's body into a van with darkened windows, and we all climb in beside him. There isn't enough room, but it seems like the right place to be. In the circumstances. They slam the doors closed. The air inside is hushed and still, the steel floor shining with cold. Two of the men stand outside, talking to the younger policeman and the photographer, and the man with the dark tangled hair. At the top of the steps, the woman with the checked dressing gown is standing with her arms folded, watching, the older policeman beside her. People have appeared on the walkway, and at windows on the upper floors. A group of children are standing on the pavement, pushing each other, shouting questions. The two men, and the younger policeman, climb into the front of the van, and there's a rush of cold damp air before they close the doors. They start the engine, and the tyres slip and squeak as we drive away down the hill. We look back, and we see the garage roof behind the flat, where Danny jumped and slipped and ran off looking for someone to tell. And we see Danny