

The Stray.

Her eyes flutter open. In those thirty seconds or so between sleep and wakefulness there is peace. In that sweet, brief period of time, she doesn't remember. She lifts her head off the pillow, looks across at the empty space where he should be sleeping and the pain slams into her chest, just as it has every morning since it happened. It is a raw, visceral pain, like someone is trying to rip out her heart. It leaves her breathless and she wonders why she continues to wake despite her efforts not to. The bedside table is littered with empty bottles, there are two more on the floor. Her bedding smells of dried sweat and something else she can't define. Outside, the sliding door of a delivery van bangs shut and next doors' cat meows outside their window. The world is still turning. She had banked on being unconscious for the rest of the weekend at the very least, now her head is banging and her mouth is dry but, compared to the bitter disappointment she feels at still being alive, it is nothing. Slumping back onto the pillow she squeezes her eyes tightly shut and prays for the end to come.

An hour later she is driven from her bed by the need to pee. She might be drowning in a deep, grief-laden depression but she wasn't quite ready to release her bladder where she lay. Not yet. Besides, she knew she just didn't have the stamina required to change the bedsheets today. Some days are better than others. Occasionally she felt able to get dressed and brush her hair. Sometimes she opened the post. Last week she even made a quick trip to the corner shop. She grabbed milk and two packets of biscuits, thrust a five pound note at the shopkeepers' wife, and fled without waiting for her change. Walking quickly back to the house she was sure that she saw someone peering out from behind a curtain, watching her. She felt their pity burning her skin, heard them whispering to someone else in the room. She bent her head and ran, scrambling through the front door and collapsing behind it, out of breath.

It's six pm and she doesn't know what happened to the hours between getting out of bed and now. She is standing at the French doors which lead into the small, overgrown garden but she can't remember coming downstairs. She is still in her pyjamas and her arms are goose-bumpy. She shivers and puts her hand on the radiator. It is stone cold. Somehow it has turned to winter without her noticing. She really needs to put the heating on. But she doesn't move from the window. Instead she continues to stare out into the garden, her arms wrapped around herself, statue like. When she finally moves she realises that darkness has fallen. As she turns from the window she thinks she sees a movement at the end of the garden, a white shadow shifting slightly. Leaning forward, she squints into the blackness but the shape is gone. Without thinking she flicks the switch on the kettle and pours the last of the milk into a dirty mug. She realises that she has not eaten all day but she is not particularly hungry. She pours some cereal into a bowl before remembering that there is no more milk and abandons the bowl on the table. Taking another bottle of vodka from the cupboard she turns out all the lights and goes back to bed.

It is late afternoon on Sunday before she wakes again. This time she remembers immediately and her stomach lurches, her blood booming in her ears. The slight movement of her head causes a sudden wave of nausea and her mouth floods with saliva. She crawls off the bed and vomits at the threshold to her bathroom, a torrent of foul-smelling greenish liquid. Grabbing a slightly damp towel from the edge of the bath she throws it over the puddle and sits on the toilet. Cradling her head in her hands she weeps tears of desperation and regret. She has never felt so alone. The long, hot summer seems so far away now. Memories crowd her mind, scenes play out in front of her eyes, showing her laughter and friends and parties on the beach. She is sitting around a bonfire, surrounded by wonderful people and as always he is there beside her, holding her hand, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as he leans in to kiss her forehead. Then he fades away until he is invisible. Her mind spins, throwing out random thoughts. What is the point without him? How do I exist now?

I need to be with him again.

After a while the tears dry up and she gets shakily to her feet, her legs numb. Pulling off her smelly pyjamas she climbs slowly into the shower cubicle, shuts the door and turns on the water. The water is icy cold but she doesn't adjust the temperature, instead she slumps to her knees and lets the freezing deluge cascade over her wretched body.

The microwave pings and startles her out of her daydream. She takes the tomato soup out and grabs a spoon, wiping it on her sleeve. Shivering now in her pink robe, she sips slowly but after a few spoonfuls she pushes the bowl away. As she fills a glass with water, she surveys the mess in the kitchen but she doesn't feel an urgent need to clear up. Suddenly she glances out of the window and sees the white shape again in the garden. It is hard to see in the fading light but something is definitely out there. She opens the French doors and peers out onto the lawn. "Hello"? she shouts, feeling foolish for yelling at nothing, but she is sure the shape moves slightly. Frightened now she shuts the doors quickly and turns the key. Then she draws the curtains. She tries again to eat some more soup but it has gone cold and is congealing in the bowl. She jumps as something falls off the fridge. Bending down to pick it up she sees the magnet with the photograph of her and Tom in Venice. The picture had been taken by a waiter just after Tom had proposed to her in the square. They were both smiling in the sunshine. There was a halo of light around their heads and they looked so happy. They were so happy, full of plans for the future. She gently touches his face in the photo and tears spill over, running down her cheeks. It seems impossible that she could ever be that happy again. Now when she tries to imagine her future all she sees is a long black, never-ending tunnel. Her friends will all get married and have children but she is destined for a lonely, meaningless life. Her mother used to say 'we only get one shot at happiness', and hers had come and gone.

She pictured her friend Susie trying to convince her to start dating again, setting her up with eligible young men but none of them would be her Tom. Dear, kind Susie, she left messages every day on the answerphone and had been here, knocking on the door, waiting patiently for a response but eventually she gave up and left. There had been cards from colleagues and neighbours put through the letterbox, full of kind words and she knew that people were thinking of her but she couldn't face any of them yet. She had forgotten how to talk to people.

Replacing the magnet carefully on the fridge she took her glass of water with her to bed.

There is a dog in her garden. He is a large, scruffy mongrel, tan and white with floppy ears. He has a wiry coat and huge chocolate brown eyes. He looks like he has been there all night, he is wet and bedraggled. He stares back at her without moving as she watches him from the window. She doesn't know what to do about him. She woke this morning without a hangover and, surprisingly hungry. It is an alien feeling to be clear-headed and ravenous but she isn't sure she has anything in the fridge which is still edible. Miraculously she finds two eggs in the salad drawer and some mushrooms which are a bit dry but not mouldy. While she cooks breakfast she makes plans to get her laptop out and do an online shop. As she puts her dishes in the sink she sees the dog. Her first thought is to go out and bring the dog inside. Then she realises that it might be wise to proceed with caution, after all this is probably a stray and he might not be friendly. She finds an old tupperware box and fills it with water then she pushes her bare feet into her wellies and unlocks the French doors. The dog looks straight at her but makes no attempt to run away. Slowly, she makes her way to the end of the garden, holding the box out in front of her. Placing it a few feet from where the dog sits she retreats a little and watches as he comes forward and drinks thirstily. When the water has all gone he sits down again and stares at her.

"Are you hungry"?, she asks softly, knowing the answer. The dog tilts his head to one side.

"I don't have anything to offer you right now but I will get something later", she promises.

The dog isn't wearing a collar but he doesn't seem to be aggressive so she pats her leg, beckoning him to her, and turns to go back inside. The dog refuses to follow her so she shuts the doors and gives him a small wave.

By early afternoon she has been to the shop for emergency supplies, including several different brands of dog food, ordered a weeks worth of groceries to be delivered tomorrow and washed up

the pile of mugs and dishes in the sink. Exhausted, she slumps into an armchair and falls into a dreamless sleep.

Her rumbling stomach wakes her up. She suddenly remembers the dog and rushes into the kitchen. He is still sitting in the same place at the end of the garden. She opens the door and calls out to him but he doesn't move. She finds a tray of dog food and empties it into a cereal bowl, then sets it on the patio outside the door. Despite the cold, she leaves the door ajar in case he wants to come inside. Her stomach rumbles again and she rummages in the freezer for a ready meal, stabs the film lid savagely and throws it into the microwave.

After dinner she goes to the window and looks for the dog. He has eaten the food and is laying on the patio next to the open door. She reaches for the bowl and his big brown eyes meet hers. He holds her gaze for a long time, his eyebrows raised inquisitively.

"Why don't you come in for a while buddy"?, she says, opening the door a little wider. The dog rests his head on his paws and sighs.

"Are you sure you won't come in? It's going to be a cold night".

After a few moments she gives up and shuts the door reluctantly. She makes a coffee and settles down in front of the television with a packet of custard creams. Before going to bed she checks on the dog. He is sleeping peacefully on the patio but it is bitterly cold. She takes the woollen throw off her couch and drapes it gently over him without waking him up.

Morning. The familiar crushing pain as she wakes, then remembers. She sits up slowly in bed and looks around the room. In the late morning light it looks like she has been burgled during the night. Empty bottles litter every surface and most of the floor, dirty clothes are slung everywhere and what in God's name is underneath that towel? Her vomit has soaked into the carpet and left a nasty looking stain. She has been wearing the same underwear for days. How has she let things get this bad?

She goes to the kitchen in search of cleaning products and rubber gloves. Peering into the misty garden she sees that the dog has resumed his usual position on the lawn. He sits looking towards the house, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

She puts more food into his bowl and refills the water dish then takes them out into the garden. As she puts them down on the patio he is already coming towards her, his head tilted, tail wagging gently. She watches him tuck into his breakfast, reaching out to stroke his back but he looks up, startled, and she snatches her hand back. Again she leaves the door ajar while she works upstairs. For the next two hours she goes up and down the stairs, filling the recycling bin with bottles, scrubbing the carpet and stripping the stale sheets from her bed. She loads the washing machine, switches it on and looks around her. The kitchen is not too bad, it can wait until tomorrow. Right now she needs a hot shower and some clean clothes.

As she showers she catches herself humming a tune and stops abruptly. It is a lullaby that her mother used to sing to her when she couldn't sleep as a child. Her mother's sweet, wavering voice fills her head and tears sting her eyes. Looking down she traces with her finger the long, livid scar which runs across her lower abdomen between her hips. It has puckered slightly as it healed, an ugly souvenir from that dreadful day, the second worst day of her life. The day she lost everything. She needs to stop thinking, feeling. The vodka helped to numb her brain, to slow everything down. It stopped her emotions from spinning out of control. The pain she feels now, stone cold sober is threatening to destroy her completely. It is unbearable and she just wants it to stop, but she knows that the only way to do that is to stop breathing and she is too afraid. She is a coward. A small voice in her head keeps insisting that she has to live, that there has already been too much death. She staggers from the shower, wraps herself in a towel and tries to focus on something else but it is too late. The memories of that day come flooding back and wash over her, leaving her weak with sorrow. The tears come fast now and she finds that she can't stop. Collapsing suddenly on the floor she gives in to her grief and great, howling sobs shake her to the core.

After a while she wakes up, confused but calm at last. She must have fallen asleep. She is warm and comfortable and lays still for a few more minutes, enjoying a strange sense of security.

A cold nose touches her hand lightly and she jumps. The dog is lying close beside her, his sad eyes staring at her face. When he sees that she is awake, his tail thumps on the floor. She smiles at him and he licks her arm, his tongue rough on her skin. Gingerly she strokes his ears and he shifts closer. He must have heard me crying and come to find me, she thinks to herself. The thought is strangely comforting.

"I bet I gave you a fright, you poor thing", she whispers, still stroking his head. He continues to look at her face as if he is reading her mind. Satisfied that she is okay he starts grooming his coat, licking rhythmically as if in a trance.

He wasn't judging her, he had simply heard her distress and come to comfort her. She begins to tell him about her baby.

She had called her daughter Betty, after her grandmother. Betty had lived in her womb for seven and a half months when her father suffered a ruptured brain aneurysm in the office and had died in the back of the ambulance.

Betty would never know her wonderful, caring father who read to her while she was in her mother's womb. She would never hear him sing her a nursery rhyme or hold his hand while they walked through the snow. He had been taken from the world while doing a job he hated so that he could provide for his family. He was a good man. He would have adored his little girl.

She had lost the love of her life in the worst way possible but she had clung to the thought of Betty, their daughter, growing steadily in her belly, getting ready to come into the world and bring new joy. She knew they would grow close, supporting each other through the tough times, and her daughter would be so like her father, it would be like having a little piece of him with her always, a living reminder of the great love they had shared.

During those dark days after he died she would cradle her belly and sing softly to the baby. Betty would respond with little pushes, and occasionally a sharp kick. Then one day the movements slowed. She had been trying so hard to eat regularly, to nourish the baby even though she had no appetite. She had finished decorating the nursery and packed a bag for the hospital but the stress and grief sapped her strength so that sometimes she could barely stand.

At her ante-natal appointment the midwife had looked concerned.

"Has baby been moving regularly?", she had asked, frowning slightly as she made notes on her computer screen.

The midwife had insisted that she went for a check up straight away. She was wheeled into the lift and taken downstairs for an emergency scan, being whisked past the other pregnant ladies in the waiting room. After a few minutes, a consultant entered the darkened room and explained gently that her baby was in some kind of distress, her heartbeat was slowing and they were gravely concerned for her safety. They thought that the umbilical cord was tangled around her neck. She needed to be delivered quickly. He grasped her hand as he talked, an expression of compassion on his face at the horror she had already experienced and the further trauma she may now face.

There was no time for a spinal block, she was given a general anaesthetic and when she woke up she knew immediately. The midwives tiptoed around her bed and not one of them would look her in the eye. Eventually, the same consultant came and pulled the curtains around her bed and she heard herself screaming.

They were too late. Betty had been born asleep, with the cord wrapped tightly around her neck. She was underdeveloped and frail but perfectly formed. Later someone had brought her into the room in a small wicker basket. A midwife lifted her gently and placed her on the bed. She had been dressed in a nappy and a pink, hand knitted cardigan with tiny pearly buttons. She remembered picturing a kind old lady making it for the poor dead babies. She was also wearing a white knitted hat and her skin was slightly blue. Her hands were ice cold.

The following day, when she was discharged from the ward, the bereavement nurse presented her with a box and told her to open it when she felt stronger. She had been escorted past the bays of beds where new mothers sat nursing their babies. They all looked tired but happy. It was a relief to

get away from all the pitying looks and whispered sympathy which had surrounded her in the hospital.

She suddenly realised that she had spoken all of this out loud and when she had finished she looked at the dog, who had been listening intently. He sunk lower to the floor and rolled over onto his back, exposing his pink tummy, his paws hanging in the air. She laughed at his audacity but she scratched his belly anyway and a thought came to her.

“Do you know, this is the first time I have said her name out loud and not been afraid it would break me”, she said, “I think I might be ready to look in the box”.

She scrabbles around under the bed and pulls the box out, brushing some dust off the top. She holds her breath as she lifts the lid. The dog sits at her feet, watching her. The box contains a number of keepsakes, Betty’s plastic hospital bracelet, a perfect lock of her dark hair in a clear envelope, her little pink cardigan, her white hat, a small teddy bear and prints of her tiny, perfect feet and hands in a beautiful silver frame. Lifting out the little hat she holds it to her face and breathes deeply but all she can smell is the wool. She pulls out the frame and studies the beautiful prints, marvelling at the myriad of lines on the tiny feet. She imagines kissing Betty’s warm, pink toes, hearing her cute giggle, and her heart lurches with sadness. The dog nudges her arm gently and she lets the tears fall onto his shaggy coat as she hugs him tightly.

A few weeks later she walks through the park, arm in arm with Susie, their combined breath hanging in the freezing air as they talk. Time has passed and although it will take a while she talks to her counsellor on a regular basis and she understands there is hope for the future. They pass a couple pushing a pram. Their tiny baby, bundled up against the cold peers out at them and Susie sneaks a glance at her friend but she is smiling a smile which reaches her eyes. The dog, who is now named Archie, trots along beside them, stopping every now and then to sniff the ground. He doesn’t stray far from her side, keeping one eye on her at all times. It is beginning to get dark and the Christmas lights in the windows glow brightly. The festive holiday is just around the corner. She is talking to people, slowly rejoining the world, with the help of her friends. She is getting there, one day at a time. And Archie, well he is there during the good days and the bad and he always knows how to make her feel better.