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Spring 2013

Catherine braces herself, but there is nothing left to come up. She grips the cold enamel and raises her head to look in the mirror. The face that looks back at her is not the one she went to bed with. She has seen this face before and hoped never to see it again. She studies herself in this new harsh light and wets a flannel, wiping her mouth then pressing it against her eyes as if she can extinguish the fear in them.

‘Are you OK?’

Her husband’s voice startles her. She hoped he would stay asleep. Leave her alone.

‘Better now,’ she lies, switching off the light. Then she lies again. ‘Must have been last night’s takeaway.’ She turns to him, a shadow in the dead-hour light.

‘Go back to bed. I’m fine,’ she whispers. He is more asleep than awake, yet still he reaches out and puts his hand on her shoulder.

‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure,’ she says. All she is sure about is that she needs to be alone.

‘Robert. Honestly. I’ll be there in a minute.’

His fingers linger on her arm for a moment, then he does as she asks. She waits until she is certain he is asleep before returning to their bedroom.

She looks at it lying there face down and still open where she left it. The book she trusted. Its first few chapters had lulled her into complacency, made her feel at ease with just the hint of a mild thrill to come, a little something to keep her reading, but no clue to what was lying in wait. It beckoned her on, lured her into its pages, further and further until she realized she was trapped. Then words ricocheted around her brain and slammed into her chest, one after another. It was as if a queue of people had jumped in front of a train and she, the helpless driver, was powerless to prevent the fatal collision. It was too late to put the brakes on. There was no going back. Catherine had unwittingly stumbled across herself tucked into the pages of the book.

Any resemblance to persons living or dead . . . The disclaimer has a neat, red line through it. A message she failed to notice when she opened the book. There is no mistaking the resemblance to her. She is a key character, a main player. Though the names may have been changed, the details are unmistakable, right down to what she was wearing that afternoon. A chunk of her life she has kept hidden. A secret she has told no one, not even her husband and son – two people who think they know her better than anyone else. No living soul can have conjured up what Catherine has just read. Yet there it is in printer's ink for anyone to see. She thought she had laid it to rest. That it was finished. But now it has resurfaced. In her bedroom. In her head.

She tries to dislodge it with thoughts of the previous evening. The contentment of settling into their new home: of wine and supper; curling up on the sofa; dozing in front of the TV and then she and Robert melting into bed. A quiet happiness she had

taken for granted: but it is too quiet to bring her comfort. She cannot sleep so gets out of bed and goes downstairs.

They still have a downstairs, just about. A maisonette, not a house any more. They moved from the house three weeks ago. Two bedrooms instead of four. Two bedrooms are a better fit for her and Robert. One for them. One spare. They've gone for open-plan too. No doors. They don't need to shut doors now Nicholas has left. She turns on the kitchen light and takes a glass from the cupboard and fills it. No tap. Cool water on command from the new fridge. It's more like a wardrobe than a fridge. Dread slicks her palms. She is hot, almost feverish, and is thankful for the coolness of the newly laid limestone floor. The water helps a little. As she gulps it down she looks out of the vast glass windows running along the back of this new, alien home. Only black out there. Nothing to see. She hasn't got round to blinds yet. She is exposed. Looked at. They can see her, but she can't see them.