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R O O M
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*To the wonderful Sarah Ballard,
our guide and friend*

Therefore I lie with her,
and she with me

SHAKESPEARE, SONNET 138

1

THE ASSIGNATION

When Neve pulled up the blinds, the kitchen sprang into life like a theatre set, empty and waiting for the familiar show to begin. She looked around: it was all a bit threadbare, the skirting boards scuffed and that crack running down the wall. She and Fletcher had been meaning to do something about it for years. There were wine stains on the table and a couple of cigarette burns, cobwebs drifting high up among the lights. Dinner from last night hadn't been properly cleared away. There were dirty plates on the surface next to the sink and the milk had been left out. Last night: she let the memory pulse through her and then she pushed it away. Not now. Not here.

The clock said it was ten past seven. She filled a glass with water and drank it slowly, tied her dressing gown more firmly, took a deep breath and turned to face the room. The door opened on cue.

‘Morning,’ she said cheerfully to her eldest son.

Rory blinked, mumbled something, bobbing his head. He was wearing blue jeans, a blue tee shirt and a blue jumper. He had her Irish paleness and he was going to be tall, as she was: in the last year, he had grown by four inches, like a piece of elastic being stretched to the point of snapping. Sometimes Neve thought she could almost see him growing, his limbs elongating, his feet large and flat, his bony face exhausted.

‘You’re very matching,’ she said. She wanted to put an arm round him but she restrained herself; he had started to dislike being touched; hugging him had become a stiff, awkward business. He would soon be eleven. Next year he would be at secondary school and in uniform.

He sat at the table and she put a packet of cornflakes and a bowl in front of him and got the milk from the side. He only ever ate cornflakes for breakfast, and now he tipped a rustling heap of them into the bowl and covered it with a pool of milk. He pulled a book towards him and opened it. From upstairs came the sound of raised voices, a lavatory flushing, a door banging. With a jolt, she remembered the clothes she had flung into the washing machine last night and hurriedly pulled them out, into the clothes basket.

The clock said seven-fifteen.

‘Morning,’ Neve said again, still cheery. One of her jobs had always been to crank up the day, get them all going.

It was Fletcher entering this time, his hair damp from

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the shower and his beard newly trimmed. He barely looked at her, staring abstractedly out into the garden instead. She was grateful for that.

‘Tea?’ he asked.

She didn’t need to answer. She always had tea in the morning. Fletcher always had coffee. It was his job to make them and empty the dishwasher and put out the rubbish. It was her job to get breakfast down the children and make their packed lunches.

She shook oats into a saucepan and added milk and a tiny pinch of salt, put it on the hob to heat. She did it all without thinking. Connor had porridge with golden syrup on top every morning. Fletcher had toast and marmalade.

Fletcher poured water onto the teabags, then went to the stairs and shouted, ‘Connor! Breakfast!’

Dreamily, Neve stirred the porridge, feeling it thicken against the spoon. Her body felt soft and boneless. In the garden the autumn light was thick. She put one thumb against her lower lip and for a brief moment closed her eyes.

She heard, dimly, that Fletcher was saying something just behind her and looked round.

‘What are your plans today?’ He put a mug of tea in front of her.

‘I thought I’d go to the allotment. Make the most of my new free time.’

To be outside, she thought with a rush of relief, there in the coolness of the morning, sinking a spade into the earth, pulling up weeds, getting tired and dirty,

blisters on her hands and soil under her nails and not thinking of anything. A few weeks ago, she had taken the plunge and gone half-time at work. She knew that in almost every way it was a foolish decision. She had always been the main earner and they needed the money more than ever. Mabel was about to go to university. Meanwhile, everything from the boiler to the roof seemed to be decaying in its own way. The gutters needed replacing and there was damp in the little room behind the kitchen. She would sometimes tot up figures, trying to make the sums come out differently, discussing it with Fletcher in a matter-of-fact way that wouldn't make him feel diminished. 'It's just the way it's turned out,' she would say.

One evening a few months ago, after she had biked home from work through the pouring rain and was making supper, still in her yellow cycling jacket with soaking trousers and squelching shoes and water dripping from her hair, she had thought: *I can't go on like this. I've had enough.* Enough of always being in a hurry, always a bit behind, always feeling there was something she'd forgotten; enough of feeling close to tears in meetings or of waking in the night with her head full of unfinished tasks and, behind everything, standing over her like a dark wall, the perpetual, relentless, bone-thinning anxiety about Mabel. Going part-time, working only three and a half days a week, was an experiment in carving out a space – just a small space – for herself so that she didn't go quite mad. *And look how that turned out,* she thought.

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Fletcher was emptying the dishwasher. She was rummaging in the fridge for something for the boys' packed lunches. Now Connor was in the room, solid and round-faced and bristle-headed and loud, everything done emphatically while his skinny elder brother bent over a book about insects. Neve looked at her sons and her husband and for a moment they all seemed like wind-up figures, going through the motions of the morning, as they did every morning, in the routine built up over the years without even noticing, each with their allotted parts.

I can see you. The phrase fell through her mind like a smooth, round stone, so clear that for a moment she thought it had been said out loud and stared around her. Fletcher was slicing toast, frowning in concentration, the tip of his tongue on his upper lip. Or had it been: *I can see you?*

She unwrapped a block of cheese. How was it possible to feel so tired and so awake at the same time, so wretched and so exultant? Normal, be normal, she instructed herself.

'Did you sleep OK?' she asked Fletcher.

'Fine. I didn't even wake when you came in. What time was it?'

'I don't know. Not too late. But you were dead to the world.' She picked up her tea and took a large, hot gulp.

'After midnight,' said a voice, cold and sharp as a blade.

'Mabel! You're up early.'

Mabel stood in the doorway. She was wearing a

short, brown-and-black checked dress, ribbed tights, smart little ankle boots. Her brown hair, which left to itself fell in cloudy curls, was tied in tight plaits and perhaps because of this her face seemed thinner than usual.

‘I’ve been awake for hours,’ she said. ‘Maybe I haven’t even slept. Maybe I was awake all night. Don’t do that!’ She glared at Connor, who was digging his hand into the cereal packet and now scooped out a handful to push it into his mouth. He glared back at her; his mouth was too full to answer. ‘Anyway,’ she continued to Neve. ‘I heard you come in. After midnight.’

‘No wonder I’m tired,’ Neve said brightly. Perhaps too brightly. She had a sudden longing for a cigarette, though it had been years since she last smoked, unless surreptitious cigarettes at parties counted. She had given up when she had children. Stopped smoking, stopped drinking, stopped dancing till dawn and eating fish and chips for breakfast, stopped spending days wandering round markets with her gang of friends or taking off for an unplanned weekend by the sea with Fletcher because, well, why not? It wasn’t that she regretted these things because even now – or especially now, when she was putting it all at risk – she loved her life, her children, her husband. But why does no one tell you, she wondered, how *hard* it is? Except of course they do tell you and you don’t believe them. You think you can do it differently, cost free, carefree.

Mabel sat herself down at the table and Fletcher put a mug of ginger and lemon tea in front of her. Mabel always drank herbal tea at breakfast and if things were

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going well, she would eat some fruit, one blueberry at a time, one segment of a tangerine, with all the white pith pulled delicately off. No fruit this morning. Neve tried not to watch her. She seemed to have spent years watching her daughter and trying not to watch her, of always being on guard, heart like a bruise and throat clogged with dread but trying to behave as if everything was all right. In eight days, she told herself, Mabel would be gone – and what would she do then? Who would she be without her?

‘How was Tamsin?’ asked Fletcher.

‘Oh, you know. Still angry. She got a bit drunk,’ Neve said, busily spreading butter on slices of bread now. ‘I didn’t like to leave her.’

Fletcher turned the radio on for the seven-thirty news and sat down with his toast and marmalade. He was looking at something on his phone, intent. Connor was saying something about football after school. Rory was levering himself from his chair, still reading his book, all bones and sharp wrists. He needed new clothes; he needed hearty soup and collard greens and sticky toffee pudding. Mabel was taking tiny sips of her tea, her eyes watchful over the rim of her mug, her neat plaits framing her mutinous face.

There was a screech of a chair as Connor sprang to his feet and at the same time the ping of a text from Neve’s mobile that was lying on the table amid all the debris of breakfast, in full view.

She turned to look and then laid a hand flat over it.

‘Go and clean your teeth,’ she said to Connor. ‘You

don't want to be late again. Then you need to feed the guinea pig.' She knew he wouldn't.

She scooped the phone up and slid it into her dressing-gown pocket.

Mabel slid from her chair. 'I'm off,' she said.

'You're going out?'

'Is that a problem?'

'Where?' It was out of her mouth before she could stop herself, but since when had words become so treacherous? 'I mean, it's a bit early. Quiet, Connor, I can't hear myself speak. Teeth! Now!'

'A bit early for what?'

'I don't know. Don't take any notice of me. I'm tired. I'll see you later. If you're around. Are you in for supper?'

'I don't know.'

Mabel put her mug down and left the room. The front door opened and then closed. She had always been good at sudden exits.

'You do look a bit washed out,' said Fletcher. 'And your bruise is turning yellow.'

Neve put up a hand to touch her cheek, which felt puffy and sore. A few days ago, cycling home in the dark, someone had pushed her off her bike, or stumbled into her path – maybe a drunk man, or a person angry with the world. She had flown in eerie slow motion through the air, thinking, *this is going to hurt*, and landed in a heap on the road. Her cheek had been badly grazed and her jeans ripped.

She looked at her husband: his collar-length dark hair

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and his neat beard; his round glasses and behind them, sad, brown, watchful eyes. There were little creases on his face she hadn't noticed before and the beginnings of a cold sore at one side of his mouth. He had a glum, morning air to him. In her pocket, the phone was alive, thrumming.

'I'll be fine. Early night.' She remembered something. 'You know that we're going to Renata's birthday tomorrow evening?'

'Is it an early evening thing?'

'More of a party.'

Fletcher groaned.

'We're out the day after tomorrow as well,' Neve continued.

'What do you mean?' said Fletcher.

'There's a kind of college reunion. Jackie something organised it, and Tamsin.'

'Jackie who?'

Neve thought for a moment.

'I can't remember. Yes. Cornfield. Jackie Cornfield. You must remember her.'

'Vaguely. But why do we need to meet her for a drink?'

'Because that's what old college friends do. Not just her – us lot, and other people as well.'

'This is going to be the week from hell.' He stood up. 'I'm going to see someone about a job. I'll be back later.'

Neve allowed herself a moment's thought about her husband. Maybe that was why he was in a sour mood. Fletcher was an illustrator. Or at least that was what

he answered when people asked what his job was. But the money he earned mainly came from his painting and decorating jobs. It was work he despised. He hated not earning money and he hated earning it. Sometimes, when he had no work on, he would sit all day in the small room they'd made into his studio and Neve knew he didn't even make a mark on the paper, and he knew that she knew. Sometimes, Mabel would be sitting in her room as well, or lying in her bed, the covers pulled over her. On those days, Neve always made an extra effort to fill the house with cheerful things: putting on music, turning all the lights on, baking cakes or biscuits, playing cards with the boys or being roundly beaten at computer games. It was like there was a button at the back of her neck: press it, and she would spring into cheerful-mother mode.

'I didn't know. I hope it goes well.' She put one hand on his shoulder. They were almost the same height: shoulder to shoulder and eye to eye. Rory was going to be tall too and it was too early to tell with Connor. But Mabel was small and slight: their changeling child.

Fletcher picked up his jacket and left. Neve shoed Connor up the stairs, shouting instructions after him. Then she was alone in the kitchen again, the air stilling around her. She took her mobile from her pocket and keyed in the password. The text appeared on the screen: *I'm free until midday. Come as soon as you can.* There was no caller ID but it didn't matter. There was only one person who could have sent it.

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She put the breakfast things into the dishwasher, wiped the crumbs off the table and hung out the few clothes in the garden, the wind fluttering through the bright skirt and the white shirt whose top two buttons were missing. Then she finished making the packed lunches: sandwiches – cheese and tomato for Rory, cheese without tomato for Connor – an apple each and an oat biscuit. It was pretty uninspired but she'd forgotten to stock up yesterday. Yesterday: like a dream; or like the only thing that was real and everything else seemed thin and vague. She chopped a nectarine into a bowl and spooned yoghurt over the top and sat down to eat it with another mug of tea, while upstairs she could hear water running and an object being dropped heavily on to the floor. But she couldn't face a mouthful.

At half past eight Neve saw Rory and Connor out of the door and watched them as they walked up the road, side by side but in their different worlds: Rory had ear-phones in and his shoulders were hunched together, his hands in his pockets. Connor looked small and robust beside him, and he walked erratically, slowing down then speeding up, swinging his backpack from one shoulder to the other.

At last she was alone. She went upstairs and took off her dressing gown, looking once more at the message on her phone and then turning it face down on the bed. She had a shower so hot that the water felt like needles on her skin, soaping her body all over, washing her hair and for once making the effort to blow-dry it rather than just rub it roughly with a towel. She cleaned her

teeth for longer than usual, watching her face in the mirror as she did so. Fletcher was right. The bruise was turning yellow, which gave her a jaundiced, unhealthy air. In two weeks' time, she would be forty-six. Next year, she and Fletcher would celebrate their twentieth wedding anniversary. They had been so young and in such a hurry then, so sure of each other and their life ahead. Now there were tiny silver threads in her dark hair: no one else had noticed them yet. There were little lines gathering on her face. At night, lying in bed beside Fletcher, she sometimes had hot flushes that made her whole body heavy and oppressive, like she was drowning in the rising flood of herself.

She should go to the allotment but she wasn't going to. She knew that one day, probably one day soon, she was going to regret this. Part of her, the part that watched and judged, already did.

She rubbed lotion into her body, cream on her face. She put on black knickers and a new black bra, snipping off the price tag, feeling slightly sick with longing, with danger, with guilt, with freedom, with being a stranger to herself. She pulled on skinny black jeans and her beloved, scuffed ankle boots, and then rummaged through her drawers till she found a jersey that was pale grey, soft against her skin. Small silver earrings. A beaten-up leather jacket that she had owned almost all her adult life. A bright scarf. No make-up: the first few times she'd worn some, but those days were over. She put perfume on her wrists and behind her ears, a dry, musky, night-time fragrance. It wasn't

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even nine o'clock but time had folded up on itself. She slid her bangle over her wrist.

Key. Mobile. Wallet. She put her new leather backpack over her shoulders. She wasn't used to it yet; it was too glossy and had too many complicated sections, so she kept losing things in it. Her old one had lasted more than fifteen years, until it had been stolen from under her nose when she was at lunch with Renata and Tamsin. She lifted her bike down from its hook in the hall and wheeled it on to the pavement, mounted and swung out into the cool bright morning, heart lifting like a bird in flight. Away.