

PICTURES

The Old Man's upstairs sleeping off a drink in the warm stench of his own blankets, with the bedroom window shut tighter than he is, even on a day like this. The stifling air's stale with the smell of his dried sweat and unremembered farts.

He made a real show of himself last night, the drunken old sod, singing and belching his way through song after boozy song, so loud and boorish they couldn't help but hear him halfway down the street. After he'd yodelled himself hoarse and his tongue was hanging out for one last gobful of croon-juice, he'd dumped his accordion on the floor in the corner of the front room where the TV's supposed to be going and staggered off to bed with half a bottle of Smirnoff clenched tightly in a hefty fist.

Loopy Lulu, who's still in her nightdress at ten o'clock in the morning with nothing on her feet, drags the heavy instrument over the bare lino onto the threadbare Persian rug where the cat's asleep in front of the fireplace. The skanky furball's half-blind from cataracts and ravaged by infirmity. It lies there purring at the cold hearth with its tail between its legs without so much as opening an eye as Lulu shifts its mangy body off the mat to make way for the squeeze box.

Her mam's been up since God-knows-what-hour but hasn't lit the fire in the grate as she normally does. Lulu supposes she's gone in to work early in order to be home for when the set's delivered. She's been out of her skull with excitement for the best part of a fortnight, imagining in her mind's eye what the TV looks like and wondering what size the screen is and how sharp the picture's going to be. Her mam's told her time and again to be patient and wait until the set turns up, but the butterflies in her belly are chewing through her gut like ants in a jam pot and the waiting's just about killing her.

There's a jar of silver coins on the mantelpiece that her mam's been filling week by week from her cleaning money. It's still maybe a quarter full even after she's forked out for the deposit on the rental and the cost of putting the aerial up's been paid. Next to the jar she's placed a copy of the new Radio Times so the two of them can choose something good to watch and view in peace for a while before the Old Man comes home from his afternoon session at the Duke of Wellington and hogs it all, the way he hogs everything else when he's had a few too many and wants to put the world to rights and bang a few silly heads together.

She's lost count of the times he's set her mam blathering and spoiled what could have been a nice day's shopping in the new arcade or maybe a knees-up in the Coach and Horses after bingo on a Friday night when he's copped for an extra late shift at the power station and woken in a strop with a chip on his shoulder, spouting a mouthful of spiteful insinuations for no reason you could possibly think of, other than the fact that he's a fat filthy pig and everyone who knows him hates the sight of him and the sound of his stupid droning voice.

The lad on the roof who's come to set the aerial up's tall and blond and muscular, just how Lulu likes a young man to be. He's been up there for ages now clumping about in his heavy leather boots, even though he said he'd be back in two ticks half an hour ago. Lulu, remembering how he'd said he was sweet enough already when she asked how many sugars he wanted in his tea wanders into the kitchen and warms the teapot ready for when he comes sliding down his ladder with the hint of a promise in those big blue eyes of his.

The last of the milk turns cloudy when she shakes the bottle. She gives it a quick sniff and pours the

contents out over the few items of crockery her mam's left in the sink for her to wash. She rinses the bottle under the hot tap that's cold in any case since the immersion went funny and puts it on the draining board next to the others.

Her mam's slippers are covered in cat hair and Hoover fluff. Lulu hates the scratchy feeling on her bare soles as she slips her feet into them for want of something better, but puts up with the discomfort and makes the best of it the way she always does, the way she supposes she's always had to. She clutches the still-wet empties to her tiny chest with her puny arms and lugs them through the narrow hallway to the front door, squinting at the sudden brightness of the cold sunshine in her face. With her eyes half-closed she fumbles the slippery bottles into the buckled metal crate the milkman's placed with the weekend's milk in beside the step.

There's barely a cloud in the sky and even though the sun's hung low this late in the morning and the air's windless, it looks like being a nice day for it, as Macho McCann always says, if you're daft enough to set a foot on the school field when there's a game about to start and he's short of a body or two for his stupid hockey team. A couple of boys kicking a deflated ball against the side of an empty garage across the street stop their play to watch her as she stoops to retrieve a fresh bottle from the crate. They're hardly more than kids really, but she lets the insides of her thighs touch together to hide the fact she has no knickers on yet. The cold air's left her feeling a trifle bristly in the nether regions with a hint of frost on the morning dew of her private parts.

She hauls herself upright with a hand grasping the door-frame for support and peers about her. The bus-shelter on the corner's packed with the usual crowd of Saturday morning shoppers dressed to the nines in their nicest clothes. A few of the women have small brats in tow acting up a bit. Here and there a young lad scuffs his shoes on the pavement or blows warm air into his hands against the cold with the collar of his coat turned up like Orson Welles, bored by the endless waiting for a bus into town.

The backward boy from the end of the street, the thick-set lad with bushy eyebrows who bombards you with the c-word from his bedroom window now and then if he's having one of his funny turns is outside the Co-op chewing the fat with little Albie from school. Albie's leaning on his tracker bike with his hands in his pockets and looking over at her from the patch of rough ground in front of the shop. The way he grins at her and the way the retard tests out a small wave of the hand with a goofy look on his face and nudges Albie sets her wondering if Albie's opened his trap about the goings-on behind the garages the other night. If he has and the Old Man gets to hear of it, there'll be hell to pay for both of them and no mistake.

There's no sign of Tony, the aerial man, at the top of his ladder or on the square of tiled roof she's able to see from the doorstep when she cranes her neck and raises herself onto her toes, so she closes the door behind her without a backward glance at little Albie and takes the fresh bottles into the kitchen and puts them in the fridge. She still feels peckish after the bacon and fried bread she rustled up for breakfast not much more than an hour ago and treats herself to an overripe cherry tomato and a stick of withered celery someone's nibbled at and put back on a cracked plate on the top shelf.

The dull thud of ungainly footsteps on the landing followed by the sound of the toilet refusing to flush brings Lulu to her feet with a start. She scurries with quick light movements into the kitchen, ignites the gas ring under the kettle with the last match in the box and sets about working a chunk of lard into the pan on the hob. She slips a couple of bacon rashers into the pan, slices half of the black pudding into thick rings and slides them one at a time off the blade of the knife into the sputtering fat and breaks a couple of eggs into a

small skillet.

With one eye on the open door and an ear cocked for the sound of the Old Man padding down the hall, she pours the boiling water from the kettle into the teapot. She places the knitted cosy over the pot to keep the heat in and snatches a quick look at what time it is by the clock on the shelf above the work surface next to the sink. Without so much as a cough to say he's come into the kitchen and is standing beside her, the Old Man sniffs a long stream of air in through his nose, savouring the delicious smell of food in the pan with his eyes closed and a heavy hand on her shoulder. He reaches across her puny chest to feel the heat of the pot through the cosy and sets himself down with a tired sigh of his beery breath on a pew at the small drop-leaf table.

'The Telegraph,' he says in his dead, hung-over monotone.

Lulu mops the grease off her mitts with a crumpled towel, dribbles a few drops of cold water from the tap over her fingers and dabs them dry on the front of her nightdress. She scurries into the front-room to retrieve this morning's paper from the window-sill where she placed it to keep it pristine just how he has to have it and drops it lightly onto the table in front of him. He picks it up with an indifferent nasal grunt and a slight upward movement of his head that's his way of saying thank you. He snaps it open at the centre pages with his nose buried in the print and starts to read.

She's overdone the pig's blood again, she can tell from the patronising sigh he gives out as he takes up his knife and fork and pushes the charred pieces to the edge of his plate. Thankfully, he keeps his mouth pretty much shut for once and gets on with snaffling the bacon and eggs. She'd much rather take a tray and eat on her own in her bedroom where she can't see his miserable face in front of her but she knows he'll only start if she does, so she plonks herself down on a chair on the opposite side of the table and picks at the thin slice of tinned meat she fried for herself when the smell of the food sizzling in the pan overwhelmed her taste-buds.

Tony comes in from outside just as she's pouring His Lordship's tea and she sets out a cup for him on the worktop. She arranges what's left of the biscuits in a neat row on a side plate, lays it on the tray the way her mam does if Auntie Ruby or someone comes round for a chinwag and traipses after him into the front room where he's down on one knee drilling a hole in the window frame. He's spread an old cotton sheet on the floor to catch the worst of the mess he's making. He gives her another of the broad grins he's treated her to half the morning as she puts the tray down on the coffee table and follows it up with such a knowing wink she can't help but pant a little as she flops onto the sofa and watches his tattooed biceps push the drill into the frame as easily as if the wood were made of paper.

If he asks her to the cinema one night she'll tell him she might think about it, she's decided. If he asks her twice and she can see he's serious she'll say sure, she can wash her hair another night, but not if it's a war film or a cowboy or anything scary, she hates those. And she'll insist he meets her out in the foyer before the picture starts not inside in the stalls the way some lads try to arrange it.

He puts the electric drill down on the sheet that's covered in curls of shaved wood from the hole he's made. With his backside perched on the sill beside the potted geranium he gives her the glad eye as she sprawls in her flimsy nightdress watching him. He slurps noisily on a custard cream he's dunked in his cup until he can see the colour rising in her cheeks and she has to avert her gaze.

'You must think I'm really handsome,' he says boldly, with a suggestive wink and a grin on his face that's almost a cocky laugh.

‘No, I don’t as a matter of fact,’ she replies, trying to suppress a giggle with a finger tip. ‘You’re the ugliest fellow I’ve ever set eyes on,’ she adds, happily. ‘And I’m not even joking!’

‘Of course you’re not joking!’ he says with what’s meant to represent a sad smile, as he dunks another biscuit. ‘I’m as ugly as sin, I know!’

He puts his empty cup on the tray and with his mouth flooded with tea and soggy biscuit hauls the heavy drill into his lap by the cable that’s trailing from the handle. With the body of the tool grasped under his arm like a set of bagpipes, he twists the bit out of the jaws and throws a forlorn look at her that’s clearly bogus but looks kind of cute and makes her heart thump a little harder in her tiny chest.

‘That’s why I’m so lonesome, I suppose,’ he says in a mock-dejected voice. He lowers the drill onto the floor between his feet by its cable and stands up with the start of a frown under his tousled quiff that almost melts her, it’s so touching. He sweeps the worst of the fine sawdust from the sill onto the protective sheet with the side of a cupped hand, wraps it into a neat bundle and takes it outside and shakes it over the aspidistras in the front garden.

He stops working for a moment to watch a bus as it crawls past him on the other side of the road, crammed with people with bored-to-death looks on their faces peering out of its steamy windows at nothing in particular. Its exhaust coughs a fog of smoke into the cold air. A group of young girls wave at him good naturedly and he waves back and shrugs and waves again with a wide grin. They continue to wave and giggle, nudging one another and kneeling on their seats to look back at him until the bus is out of sight and the laboured chug of the engine has faded into silence.

He gives a final wave even though the bus has disappeared. He folds the sheet over a rung of his ladder to free his hands and feeds the coaxial cable he left hanging loose and unpinned down the outside wall of the house through the hole he’s drilled. There’s an idiotic look on his face; his eyes are crossed and his tongue is protruding playfully from the side of his mouth in case she’s watching him, which they both know she is, even though she’s making a good job of pretending she isn’t.

When he comes inside again, she’s ended the pretence of fiddling with the Sunday-best table cloth that’s draped over the clothes horse next to the sideboard and is sitting upright in an armchair with her legs crossed. The hem of her nightdress is gathered under her thighs and her knees are lightly touching with the loose strands of her frowzy hair tucked behind her ears in what she’d describe as a composed but flirty pose, if anyone bothered to ask her.

‘There’s a really good picture on at the Odeon, you know,’ he says out of the blue after a minute or two of not saying anything, with the hint of a wink and a masculine smile as he wrestles a stubborn connector onto the end of the coax. ‘They’re putting on reruns of the Bond films for the whole of this month.’

She gives him what you might call an uncomprehending look, not all of it intentional, and asks, ‘Who’s Bond?’

‘Who’s Bond?’ he splutters, tickled pink by her apparent dumbness. ‘James Bond, the secret agent! Shaken, not stirred. You know,’ he says, not quite so sure of his ground now, as she offers him a well-rehearsed blank expression. ‘Double oh seven. Doctor No...’

Her face retains its nebulous veneer and she purses her lips, shakes her head slowly from side to side and looks up at him. She meets his eyes in a mildly seductive gaze. ‘I don’t think I’ve seen it,’ she tells him softly, batting her eyelids.

‘That’s what I’m saying,’ he says, somewhat frustrated by the vagueness of her response and snatching at

his words as his initial cockiness begins to waver. 'I was wondering if you'd maybe like to come out with me and watch it some night.'

'Which night?' she asks him, a trifle coyly.

'Well, um...how about tonight?'

She gives the matter a little thought and chews her lower lip in contemplation, content to reel him in now that she's felt a nibble at the end of the line she's cast.

'What kind of a doctor is he?'

'What? No, he's not a doctor, he's a secret agent,' he explains in a voice that makes him sound less calm even than he feels. 'Doctor No's the last film they put on, the first one. The one showing tonight's called from Russia with love. It's pretty good by all accounts.'

'I like a nice romance,' she says facetiously, keeping the dumb chick angle going for as long as it suits her. 'Is it in English?'

'I think so. It should be.'

'I don't want subtitles,' she says. 'It puts me right off!'

'No, it won't have subtitles,' he says, as much to reassure himself as to convince Lulu of the fact. 'I'm sure it won't have, the other one didn't.'

He fidgets himself upright and gives her a hopeful look, searching the blank expression on her face for a hint of a thumbs-up. 'What do you say, then?' he asks hesitantly, when he can't figure out how her mind's working.

'I might think about it,' she says, with the dawn of a glint in her beaming eyes.

The loud metallic clatter of the door-handle as the Old Man bursts into the room, wild-eyed in a sudden fury and with his yellowing teeth bared menacingly as he glares at Tony, startles Lulu out of any flirting and she clambers to her feet, her little heart racing. She retrieves the tea tray from the coffee table and trips her way past him into the hall.

'Morning, Mister Love,' she hears Tony's voice say, as she pulls the door closed behind her and goes into the kitchen with the tea things.

'I know it is,' the Old Man bawls at him. 'And you've been here for bloody half of it!'

The grumpy bastard's cleared all trace of food from his plate, even though he sneered at the black pudding she'd frazzled, and mopped up the last of the grease with the slice of bread he said he didn't want. He's put the plate and his knife and fork in the sink for her to wash along with the things her mam left when she went to work, but left his half-empty cup on the table to signify that he wants her to pour him a top-up.

It takes an eternity to bring a pan to the boil now the immersion heater's packed up again. Instead, as there isn't much for her to wash she empties the kettle into the sink, gives the liquid a good squirt and tops up the shallow water level from the cold hot tap. The dishcloth gives off a rancid odour from not being rinsed for a while. It turns her stomach when she puts her nose to it. She splashes suds over each greasy surface, jiggles the cups and saucers around in the tepid water to rinse the worst of the tea stains off, piles it all on the draining board and leaves it to dry.

Upstairs, she flushes away the disgusting turd the Old Man's left in the bowl and sprays the new peach aerosol her mam's started buying from the Co-op to mask the bad smell that permeates the stairs and landing. Once the roar of the water rushing through the plumbing has quieted and the cistern's full, she can hear the sound of Tony packing his tools into his van and the scrape of his ladder on the metal bars of the

roof-rack.

She opens the bathroom window a notch to let some air in, flushes the toilet again and goes into her bedroom. Her school books and the homework she was supposed to finish by yesterday lie in a heap on her dressing table. She pushes it all to one side and sits on the end of her bed with her knees drawn up, leafing through the pages of the Radio Times with the curtains still shut from last night and the light turned on.

When she's finally done with checking the listings for tonight's TV, she takes a pair of cotton knickers from a drawer in her dressing table and pulls them on and goes out onto the landing. She listens for a few minutes for a sound of the Old Man moving about but hears nothing and goes back into her bedroom. After a while, she opens her curtains and turns the light off and edges her way downstairs, still in her nightdress and with nothing on her feet, to see if her mam's home yet.

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