

## The Canary

The last time I'd visited, the smell of settled cat urine had greeted me at the front door. Huey had been imprisoned for days, his paws printing golden keepsakes across the speckled linoleum. I'd only rushed by to collect the last of my things — a salt rock lamp, a batteryless vibrator, and an eighth of weed, which I couldn't even smoke. This time the smell had been replaced by...bleach, was it? Bleach mingled with ciggies? I hadn't texted Mum to tell her I was coming. Dr Milligan had said that it was best — emotionally speaking — not to.

'S'only me,' I said, thumping on the door. My left hand, bitten pink by November air, rested instinctively on my tightening belly. The *stomp*, scuffle and *thud* betrayed Mum's usual dilly-dallying. 'What are you *doing* in there?' A gust of wind hissed through me, and I pressed my hand down tighter.

Three clicks — it used to be two — and the door opened. Mum's very *being* was fresh to me, in that jolting kind of way people are when you've had a long gap since last seeing them. Her face was a moony, like mine, that was as usual, but this time it was more fuzzed out, as if it was dissolving behind November clouds. She stood with half of her body — *shrinking*, I must say— tucked behind the door. I walked inside, keeping my puffer zipped up and my mask hidden in my pocket.

Her eyes kept, detective-like, on my face, which had petrified into a polite smile. The way her eyebrows remained fixed, pinched even, revealed an achiness behind her welcome grin. I curled my fist and tucked it into my coat sleeve and as I did, some memory decided to possess me from the outside in. My screwed fist belonged to my five-year-old frame, and I had it nestled up inside the fleecy sleeve of my school jumper. I was hop-scotching around the flat in three pairs of socks when Mum, coddled in her dressing gown, a ciggie melting out of her mouth, promised that the heating would be back on by New Years. I took a sharp inhale to come back into the room. Too sharp. I pictured fine bleach molecules — in black, for some reason — journeying up my nostrils and settling in my lungs. The smell was impossible to acclimatise to.

‘God,’ I said, wincing. ‘Someone’s been on a cleaning spree’.

‘I’ve been a busy girl,’ she replied, proud. She can’t have realised it, but there was a patch of mocking damp just above her, unreachable at her five-foot-nothing. *Be ready to distract her if she notices*, I told myself. She clanked a teaspoon against a mug, stirring in too-much milk to my tea. And then she was off, not a second spared, pacing the conversation with the same vigour as her stirring. ‘You didn’t reply to my Whatsapp message,’ she said. ‘I told you. I’m *suing* them.’

‘Oh — what? I didn’t see it,’ I lied, fixated on the spoon. I broke away from her and sat down on a plastic chair, indulging in my pause-before-reply time. I surveyed the

state of the stripped flat and donated her a few under-breath '*yeahs*' before I sensed words brewing in her throat. I cut in quick enough, making sure I still had some steer in the conversation. 'Who are you suing?' I asked in a throwaway tone. Surely, if she said it out loud, she'd realise *just* how ridiculous—

'The NHS,' she said, without missing a beat. She landed my mug onto the plastic table, hot tea flicking onto my skin. She scraped out the red chair opposite me and sat. Her eyes were blazing, her brain working with legal jargon and courtroom fantasies. 'Unfair bloody dismissal.'

Before she had taken another breath to speak, I cut in with

'Good luck with that.'

I took a sip of my tea and put it down, as if it's *donk* landing was an audio manifestation of my full stop on the matter. I stole the lull in conversation for a second of me-time and breathed (*mouth-ways*) like Dr Milligan had taught me the week before. It had been simpler to execute in his office, in that gooey armchair, being snuggled by the warmth of the radiators. Still, I persisted. In for four, hold for four, out for five. I'd nearly made it through one round when she said

'I don't *need* luck.'

She sprung up and marched over to the sink, thrusting her hands under the tap.

‘There was this nurse in Kansas, right?’ she began, her voice full of promise. ‘And she, would you believe, she was awarded *five thousand* dollars last month for unfair —’

‘Good Mum. Good,’ I said, curt.

My tone, it wasn’t something she’d heard before. I wondered if a tone like that, particularly if emanating from one of her daughters, was beyond her register. She continued washing her hands, her eyes stuck on the water. I looked away when I realised that she was only using the red-dotted tap. I glanced over at the sofa, at the coffee table where the TV had last stood. If I squinted at the cushions, I could still make out the dent, *my spot*, where I used to balance on my tiptoes and belt Britney at the top of my lungs. Stacked on the table, in place of the TV, was a wholesale box of baked bean tins. Above it rested one full of tomato soup. It hit me then. A cold, naughty slap.

*I’m the parent now.*

My tongue dug for a sentence suitable to cleanse the air with. It didn’t need to do much, just distract her, and me, from everything that had *ever* been said between us.

‘What about...how’s your —’

But I was one step ahead...the way every parent should be. Her responses played out before I’d even opened my mouth.

How's the book club? *Oh no love, I left it last month. Bunch of pathetic busybodies, they were.*

How about your mates down the cafe? *Don't get me started on them. Glad to see the back of them. Bunch of spineless sheep who have nothing to —*

Huey paced into the room, ginger and doughy and true. I exclaimed his name, too loudly, and kneeled onto the mop-damp floor to caress his mane. Through the walls, two characters spitting on a soap opera spilled in, scoring Huey's purring. Mum moved to her seat and flashed us an approving smile of dull teeth, sunset bags under her eyes. My beat-up backpack was resting beside her chair, a bulging shape from inside it calling me. The gift box had '*To Mum*' written on it, in cursive glitter.

'Anyway love, how are you?' she asked, her voice airy. She checked over her shoulder every couple of seconds, one keen eye surveying the kitchen. She clasped her hands, one over another. The skin was a fried pink. 'You're still poorly are you?'

'Well, a little, nothing too extreme. It's not, *you know.*' I clamped my lips shut.

'*Anyway.* It's nice to see you...it's been so bloody long, hasn't it?'

'It has, hasn't it?' she said, half-committed. And then it happened. 'I know you hate to *talk* about it love, but, as I've been trying to say — and I've sent you all those videos — when you do your *own* research, it's really obvious that—'

'Mum,' I said, forceful enough that Huey dipped away from me. 'I'm not — let's talk about something else please.'

When the front door click-clack-clicked shut and I stepped onto the courtyard balcony, I caught a whiff of impending rain in the air. *Oh*, I thought, I guess I did get used to the smell, after all. I guess you could get used to anything if you were around it for long enough, even if it was doing rotten things to your insides.

I'd improved in the three months since I'd left, that's what Dr Milligan had said. Gotten the colour in my cheeks back. I used my sleeved hand to guide myself down the grotty staircase, step by tentative step. I crunched over frozen grass to reach the bus stop. Masked up, on the top deck of the bus, I dove my hand into my backpack to double check the box that I hadn't given her.

The pink babygrow inside it read "*World's best Nana*". I folded the plush cloth in two, gently replaced the lid and leaned my head against the vibrating window. I took in caged breaths, for one, two, three rounds, and then opened the Sainsburys bag. She had forced into my palm before I'd left...*just in case I got sicker*. The canary yellow box carried a pharmacological name in red that I couldn't pronounce. Bold lettering below it assured me that it was for use by veterinarians only. I rolled it back up in the plastic and shoved it to the bottom of my bag. From the depth of my belly, she gave me a sharp kick.