ADAM NEVILL

'Horrifyingly scary'
Sunday Times

No One Gets Out Alive

By Adam Nevill

Banquet for the Damned

Apartment 16

The Ritual

Last Days

House of Small Shadows

No One Gets Out Alive

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ONE

The dream receded quickly and Stephanie recalled little of it, beside an anxious desire to leave a cold, greyish place; a narrow space in which people stood too close to her. One of them had been crying.

Into the unsettling moments, trailing the end of sleep, came a relief that only her panic lingered from the nightmare. The respite was twinned with a sense of loss for something important, yet indefinable and left incomplete. And she was cold. Where her head poked out of the duvet it stiffened, as though her bed had been placed outside of the building.

Stephanie's eyes were open. She was lying on her back and could see nothing above. But inside the darkness was a voice, a muffled continuous voice surrounding her waking thoughts. Not a single word was loud or clear enough to be understood, but she was horribly certain the muttering could not be part of the dream because she was fully awake. There was no urgency to the voice, or particular emphasis, or even emotion; the tone suggested monotony, a monologue.

The voice issued from the side of the room, near the fireplace that she couldn't make out in the dark. Even with

the lights off, not even an ambient glimmer peeked around the thick curtains.

A radio? In another room?

Though the more she considered the voice, the greater was her impression that someone was speaking behind the wall on the other side of the room. But there was nothing on the other side because the house was detached. So perhaps a television was switched on – *yes, don't forget those* – in the room below her own, and the sound was travelling up through the chimney.

When the voice in the fireplace began sobbing, Stephanie felt like joining in. It was a strange kind of broadcast that allowed one person to speak continuously before breaking down on air.

Could be another tenant. In a nearby room someone might have been talking to themselves and was now crying. This sound of genuine anguish introduced a picture into Stephanie's mind of a woman kneeling on the floor beside an open fireplace, clutching her face.

She could not go and ask after them. She disliked herself for feeling embarrassed by another's distress, but it was the middle of her first night in the house and she wasn't confident enough to offer that kind of gesture to a stranger.

But thank God it's only a neighbour. For a moment I thought—

The tension returned to her body and her mind so quickly and with such force that she sucked in her breath as if she'd stepped into cold water. Because no radio or television or heartbroken tenant could possibly account for the scratching that began beneath her bed.

She might have risen from the bedclothes screaming had she not arrived at a new hope: that the grating noise against timber was issuing from beneath the floorboards, as opposed to the wooden slats on the underside of the bedframe.

Mice! There were mice here; she had seen two little cardboard traps, the type containing a blob of poisonous blue bait, on the first floor landing and the second floor toilet. When she was shown around the house yesterday morning the sight of the traps had shocked her; they were another symbol of diminishing choices, of being compromised by poverty – a side to freedom improperly considered before independence was achieved, or exchanged for a different kind of captivity. But she'd lived in a building infested with mice before, and seen similar traps in the warehouse where she worked last summer.

And during your first night in the darkness and unfamiliarity of a new room in a strange building, the sound of mice was bound to be alarming and to seem too *large* a disturbance for small animals. When you lay alone in bed, the sound of tiny claws were amplified in the silence of deep night, *everyone knows that*. Only in these circumstances could such a noise suggest the activity of determined human hands beneath your bed.

The mice were having a go at something that was rustling. *Polythene. Maybe. Yes, it must be polythene.* There could be a plastic carrier bag under there and the mice, or rats – *don't even go there* – were having a go at the bag, or tearing something under the floorboards. *Yes, that is a better idea.*

Beneath her bed the sound of rustling increased in

volume and ardour and her imagination swamped her thoughts again with the notion that these were, in fact, human fingers pulling at polythene. She was just about to sit up and reach for the bedside lamp – the one she'd read by before she fell asleep, satisfied she'd found a new room so quickly – when everything suddenly got worse and she was filled with the kind of fear that was mindless, that was madness. Because Stephanie could now hear a fresh intrusion of noise inside her room.

Beyond the foot of her bed, between the two large sash window frames, was a table and chair. On the table were her unpacked bags. And from this area came a rustling, a rummaging, as if someone's hands were going through her rucksack. The painted floorboards beneath the rug creaked as the intruder shifted its weight.

Behind the fireplace a woman wept.

Under the bed fingers pulled at polythene.

The darkness was filling with sound.

Stephanie could see nothing. The air was so cold she shivered. She desperately wanted to reach for the bedside light, but that would creak the old bedframe. She didn't want to make a sound, any sound at all.

And what will I do if I turn the light on and someone is standing there?

The door to her room was locked. The key was inside the lock. *Had they come in through a window?* Could she get off the bed and reach the door, and hold the key in her fingers, and turn the key in the lock, and open the door, and step through the doorway . . . before *it* reached her?

Can I fight? Should I start screaming?

She had no strength for screaming, let alone defence.

Everything inside her was frigid with a fear so vast she was nothing but terror; she became stone from the hair on her head to the toes on her feet.

Unwelcome images flashed: cotton buds being used to take swabs, police officers in plastic overalls collecting hairs from a carpet, a gurney covered with a sheet being loaded into an ambulance, watched by a woman in the doorway of a nearby house.

Stephanie sat up and reached for the bedside table. The bedframe made the sound of an old wooden ship.

The rifling of her bags stopped.

She slapped a hand around the bedside table. The wooden surface was cold under her mostly useless fingers. She found the rubber cable with the light switch attached to it, then lost the cable, sensed it swing away from her fingertips in the darkness.

Footsteps creaked across the floor towards her bed.

She groped for the cable again and found the metal stem of the lamp instead. When she located the cable her desperate fingers twitched their way to the plastic switch.

Beneath her feet the mattress dipped as someone sat down.

Through the darkness she was sure a face was moving closer to her own.

She snapped the lamp on and turned to confront the intruder sitting on the end of her bed.

'Oh God, oh God, oh God, shit, shit, shit, oh God.'

TWO

Stephanie sat in the pre-dawn darkness with the duvet grasped under her chin. Through the open curtains the sky turned from black-blue to mackerel-grey. The bedside light was switched on. The overhead light was switched on. In the palm of one hand her mobile phone was cloudy with the heat from her tight grip. On the bedside cabinet the small travel clock clicked towards six a.m.

When she'd turned the bedside light on, there had been no one sitting on her bed and no one in her room. When she'd summoned the courage to look under the bed, she'd seen large balls of greyish dust on painted floorboards, but no plastic bag. Her door key was still hanging from the lock of the secured door. The sash windows were closed and held tight with metal clasps. Only her clothes occupied the walnut-veneered wardrobe. She couldn't be sure that someone had actually interfered with her bags during the night either, because she'd left them unzipped and gaping before she went to bed.

The scratching under the bed must have stopped when the light came on, though she couldn't recall the exact moment the noise ceased. When she put an end to the darkness there had been no voice in the fireplace either.

The fireplace grate and surround were made from

metal, thickly coated in black paint and dusty. The chimney flue was no more than a few inches across. She'd moved her ear close to the fireplace and heard what sounded like a distant wind, nothing more.

Stephanie looked at the walls around her more closely. They had not been decorated in years, not since the yellowing paper, carrying the impression of bamboo stalks and leaves, had been pasted upon them. The room was as depressing as the others she had lived in since leaving home; small capsules of space left stranded by the onward surge of life, untouched by modernization and a source of revulsion for those of means. These rooms were now home to those who were only one more misfortune away from homelessness, and so close to dropping out of the statistics of the unemployed and into the statistics of those with no fixed address, or those reported missing.

Stephanie squeezed the duvet until her nails pressed through the fabric and hurt the palms of her hands.

Thoughts of the MDMA she'd once taken came back to her with the full weight and pressure of an accusation, as did memories of the skunk weed she'd smoked a few times, and the magic mushroom tea she'd once drunk – all three years ago in her first year at college. She wondered if those brief and fledgling experiments with drugs had been the cause of the hallucinations; some kind of delayed reaction.

And as she sat in bed, waiting for the morning, it began to seem a long time since she had woken in a room loud with intrusive sound. Most of her mind now insisted that the experience was part of the indistinct nightmare, that had continued in the form of footsteps crossing the room,

followed by the impression of someone sitting on the bed. All of it could have been imagined.

Must have been.

But what she had so recently heard in the dark didn't feel like the lingering effects of a dream. After she had slapped the lights on and finished her inspection of her sealed room, she'd thought about ghosts for a long time. And she remembered a story her dad had told her. Long before her natural mother died, her dad told her that his own mother, Stephanie's paternal grandmother, once appeared beside his bed and asked, 'Are you coming?' The following morning her dad was called on the phone by his sister to say their mother had died the night before, in her bed, in her home, on the other side of town. The story had enthralled Stephanie, but also given her a hope that death was not the end. What she'd just endured made her wish that death was, in fact, final.

Her dad also used to call her 'my miracle girl' because she'd come close to death as a toddler after swallowing seawater. She had no memory of the incident, but had briefly wondered, when she was small, if nearly dying had made her special. Because at the funerals of both her grandfathers, in a way she still could not explain, she remembered being engulfed by a sense of them around her, and inside her head, at the terrible moment their coffins rolled behind the red curtains in the same crematorium chapel in Stoke.

But this was the sum total of her experience with the supernatural. Stephanie hadn't watched a horror film since she was sixteen and she wasn't religious. She'd always

assumed she needed to sort out her place in this world before she thought of the next.

Looking back on the episode that had so recently occurred in her new room, she was struck by a notion that two very different places had opened onto each other, or come together.

The sky turned from mackerel to white-grey.

Exhaustion lay heavy inside her body, but the fatigue helped the shock dwindle. Listless memories of the previous day drifted through her mind as the sun rose.

There was a blister on the little toe of her right foot and her calf muscles bulged with aches; both reminders of the three trips she had made on foot from a tiny rented room in another sub-divided house in Handsworth to this one. She'd carried her bags three miles through quiet, identical streets choked with parked cars. Her new room was the same price but much bigger than her last place – a room she had called *the cell*. She'd nearly gone mad inside 'the cell' during her first few months in Birmingham.

Weariness from the move and from the weekend's two twelve-hour shifts, working as a steward in the reception of a caravan show, had put her to sleep before ten p.m. She'd awoken more frightened than she could remember between two and three. In one hour, un-refreshed and tense, she would need to leave for work.

How did I get here? Why is this happening to me?

She ran through the seemingly ordinary sequence of events that led to her sitting up in bed, terrified and praying for the dawn light to hurry into the sky. The day before, an overly friendly man she had found it hard to

like, a Mr McGuire, or 'Knacker', had guided her round 82 Edgehill Road: an old, neglected, but otherwise ordinary house with rooms he let out to lodgers scratching around the bottom of the rental market.

Knacker was the landlord and lived on the top floor in a private flat. He had shown her this large room with high ceilings that she had been so excited to find at forty pounds per week. It had been advertised on a card in the window of a local grocer's: BIG ROOM. 40 QUID FOR WEAK. GIRLS ONLY. SHARD BAFROOM, KICHEN. V CLEEN. There had been a mobile phone number too, and she had grinned at the misspellings and imagined the house was let by migrants for whom English was still a mystifying second language. Many of the big Victorian houses in the area were sub-divided into bedsits. Her ex-boyfriend, Ryan, who was working in Coventry, knew Birmingham well and had said Perry Barr was mostly an Asian area, but increasingly popular with Eastern European migrants and students from the City of Birmingham University. He'd said it was really cheap, and really cheap was all she had the budget for. But at least this place was only let to females, and in the most deprived areas of town that was an asset among such unappealing pickings.

There was nothing extraordinary about the circumstances of her being here; anyone in the same position could have ended up in the same room and, therefore, experienced the same thing. But sitting in a strange bed, in an unfathomable building, made her feel that her life resembled a landscape pitted with bad decisions and unfortunate situations created by circumstances she had no control over. And the craters of hasty choices, or impacts

made by fate, were interspersed with the shadows of anxiety about her immediate future.

Did she always bring these situations upon herself? Her stepmother had always said as much. *Bitch*. But how is *it* done, how is control over your life possible when you have no money, and no prospect of getting more than a little to survive on? *To exist on* was closer to the truth. *Because that is what you are doing: existing, not living.*

A familiar suspicion revived itself: that she hadn't even started in life and was still outside it somehow, looking in, drifting, or being blown about its fringes, while trapped in places where anything could happen to her.

Regret had become tangible overnight and was now a lump in her throat and a cold weight in her tummy; it made her face literally feel too long. Taking the room had been impulsive, as was handing over £320 in cash as a deposit and first month's rent to a man who made her wary.

She now seriously regretted not calling Ryan and asking if he knew anything about the street, or even to come down to get his sense of the landlord. She hadn't spoken to Ryan in a month, but didn't know anyone else well enough to ask them to perform such a task on her behalf. Her friends were mostly at home with their parents, applying for jobs, retaking A Levels and signing on in Stoke.

Now that she wanted to leave the house and move on again after only one night, Stephanie worried she might not get her deposit back from Knacker McGuire. She would need the deposit to pay for the next room, or there would be no next room. Until she was paid for the temp

work she had this week, she was down to fourteen pounds and change. Fourteen pounds and thirty-two pence to be exact, because when you are skint you do count every penny.

According to the text message she'd received from the temp agency yesterday afternoon, while she lugged her bags between the two houses, she would spend the next three days giving out food samples in a shopping centre. So when today's eight-hour shift finished, unless she retrieved her deposit and found a new room that didn't require a reference, she would have to return to this house. To this very room. There was nowhere else for her to go.

She didn't know what to do. Stephanie cried as quietly as she could, her wet face pressed into the duvet. She thought of the woman she'd heard in the night.

House of tears.

The sky's brief glow was smothered by charcoal clouds full of rain. She would have to get ready for work soon.

At ten minutes past six the world reinserted itself into her isolation and introversion. Hot water pipes and the solitary radiator beside her bed gurgled reassuringly. The air about her face warmed. In the distance of the house, downstairs she thought, a door closed. Soon after a toilet flushed. In the room behind hers, at the end of the corridor and overlooking the street, the heavy footsteps of a stranger announced themselves and remained an active presence until her alarm sounded at half past six.

In the cluttered concrete yard beneath her windows, a dog stirred and moved its short chain. Far off, a police car

raced through the dawn streets. The dog barked a gruff, angry retort, then whistled through its nose and fell silent.

Stephanie got out of bed and found her robe, her towel and her washbag. The rug was crispy beneath the soles of her bare feet. She unlocked the door and felt her skin prickle and shrink in the cold air of the unlit corridor outside her room. By the light that fell from the doorway of her room, she watched the other two doors on her floor. The occupants had fallen silent. No light bled from beneath their doors. She did not know who lived in the rooms around her, and that ignorance made her feel small and vulnerable and nervous. She'd not long stopped crying, but her eyes burned again.

She looked at the fly-specked lightshade above her, noted the forlorn silence of the unlit stairwell. The place was a refuge for transients like her. The dismal corridor seemed to confirm that this was where she belonged now: a place of indifference, anonymous neighbours, coughs in the night from gruff throats, creaks of worn bedframes, and televisions murmuring behind closed doors; hidden histories, disparate accents and alien languages, the awkwardness of meeting strangers in shabby corridors with dressing gowns tucked under their chins. This was a place of stale air and overfull bins, compromised privacy, petty thefts, and new faces as worn but disingenuously watchful as the last crowd.

She'd seen it all before in the six months since she'd left home. Not yet twenty and her eyes should never have looked upon this side of life. If her dad was still alive he'd have been furious with Val, her stepmother, who'd thrown her out. 'You don't want to find yourself down there.

Down there with the rest of them,' he'd said while she studied for her A levels, specifically to escape a home traumatized by her stepmother's personality disorder – an instability that had raged daily beneath the roof of Val's house until Stephanie was gone from it. There was no going back there.

Yesterday, when she'd asked about the other tenants in the house, Knacker had sniffed and said, 'Uvver girls. Stoodents mostly. All kinds, Powls – all kinds bin in 'ere over the years.' Knacker had come up from Essex to take care of his family home, but claimed to be a Brummy originally, and constantly sniffed up his long, bony nose during the interview. 'All over. Bin all over, me. Like to move around, yeah? Spain, you name it. Bin everywhere, me. Done it all.'

Though he hadn't said much specifically about himself or the house, he had asked her a lot of questions. With hindsight, once he had the deposit, she wondered if he'd actually been evasive about the other tenants, while she'd mistaken his brief non-committal replies for disinterest. His big washed-out eyes had slid all over her but darted away when she looked directly at him.

She didn't want to think about his face. She didn't want to be here. Not for the first time since she left Stoke, with her stepmother ranting behind her, she asked herself, *What have you done?*

THREE

The bathroom was cold enough to make her think twice about a shower. The air bit her face, her ankles and feet. Even with the water splashing hot inside the tub and creating steam, the mere thought of removing her gown was an anticipation of pain.

Grit and fluff had stuck to the soles of her feet when she'd flitted down one flight of stairs to the communal bathroom on the first floor. She wished she'd worn her trainers, or ended her resistance to slippers; they had their uses.

She checked the radiator. It burned red hot but failed to transfer any heat into the cramped space.

The room was bone dry and dusty. A red carpet, as stiff and desiccated as the rug in her room, crackled under her feet. Plain paper painted a watery yellow covered the walls. In the corners above the toilet and sink, a rash of black spores erupted from damp plaster. Around the sink, old black whiskers had fossilized under the overflow hole. She wondered if she would have become a resident if she'd properly inspected the bathroom during her tour yesterday. Though to be honest, she'd used worse.

Sitting on the toilet to pee, she sensed being on the edge of a bad smell that wouldn't fully reveal its source. There

was a strong odour of damp and old carpet in the air of the bathroom, but the ripe sweetness of meat in deep bins suggested itself too.

Wiping the grimy and discoloured enamel of the bath with sodden toilet paper was a delaying tactic for actually stepping into the shower. When was the last time the bath had been cleaned?

Up on the second floor there was only a toilet on the landing, without a sink, so there was no alternative to this bathroom in such a large building. But the sink and the toilet seat had been dusty before she used them, which was odd because she had heard this toilet flush a little while ago, so someone must have been in here.

As far as she could tell there was a self-contained flat on the ground floor, another on the third floor, and six bedrooms in the communal section of the building: three bedrooms on the first floor, three on the second floor, but only one complete bathroom. Grim. The idea of someone not washing their hands after using the toilet this morning made her wince. *What sort of people lived here?*

She checked the time on her phone. *Better get a move on.*

She laid her shampoo and conditioner bottles behind the blotchy taps at the top of the bath. When the room was sufficiently cloudy with steam to give an impression of heat, she braved the cold and removed her robe, her t-shirt and underwear. She didn't shiver as much as shake. By the time she stepped into the cascade of water, her feet and fingers were numb.

The window was closed, the heating was on. How could it be so cold?

As dawn struggled through a cleaner portion of the window, daylight revealed an aperture blocked with painted iron bars, fixed to the exterior wall.

What would you do in a fire?

The windows in her room were not barred, so maybe this was a security feature of the lower floors – something else she hadn't noticed yesterday in her determination to get out of the cell. But it was yet another reason to get out of here. The very idea of moving again was exhausting, but she couldn't remain here. She wanted to run someplace familiar.

Ryan.

Whenever fear and anxiety had overrun her since she'd arrived in Birmingham, her first thought was always to call her ex, Ryan, and ask him if she could return to his room – at least until she found work in Coventry, or somewhere nearby. But that wouldn't be possible until the weekend, because she needed the next three days' work giving out the samples. She'd make £120. And a return to Coventry would also be an act of outright desperation; the very idea made her feelings crawl around on all fours in the form of guilt and grief.

She didn't want to go through all that again. She didn't want to be with Ryan. There wasn't a doubt in her mind about that. Her being at his place would be inappropriate and near unbearable. And a sorry-faced return to Ryan's life would involve her sleeping on Ryan's bed *again*, while he fidgeted on the floor in a sleeping bag.

Going back to his room, but not back to him, would mean tears, mostly his, and a revival of the discomfort and awkwardness that would overwhelm a few nights in his

room. His desperate need for them to get back together would take him over. It was one of the main reasons she'd shifted down to Birmingham to find work: to cut them off from each other.

Stephanie thought herself into brief surges of hope, which sank into a familiar cycle of stifling frustrations and ended in dread. *Nothing new there*. She always seemed to be inside houses owned by other people, restless with anxiety or paralyzed by regret. How could she have been so foolish as to believe she could make it on her own in a strange city?

Conscious of the time, she washed her hair quickly, constantly rotating her body under the water that struggled to escape the limescale-encrusted shower head. After a few uncomfortable minutes, she climbed out of the bathtub and wrapped herself in the towel while her teeth chattered.

Not having to use the bathroom for much longer was the only relief she could draw from the experience. She could pick up a scourer and cleaning spray on her way home from work, from a pound shop, and just use the sink until she moved out. No one need know. As she thought about how bearable she could make her time at 82 Edgehill Road, she heard a voice.

The cold forgotten for a moment, Stephanie stepped away from the bath, because she was sure the voice had come from the tub.

Steam clouded to the ceiling. She swiped her hands before her face to clear her vision.

Silence.

And then she heard it again: a faint voice down by the

floor. But not one directed at her; the speaker seemed to be talking into a corner, or even at the floor. Maybe from under the floor?

She followed the direction of the voice and wondered if there were tenants on the ground floor and some weird acoustic or cavity in the building was throwing voices into the nearby rooms.

She lowered herself to her hands and knees. But the carpet was filthy enough to make her rear back to her heels and bat the gathered hairs and grit from her damp hands.

'What is my name?'

Stephanie stood up and backed against the nearest wall. Opened the bathroom door to let the steam escape so she could see the woman who had spoken, and only a few feet from her face at that.

What is my name? The question had risen as if someone lying inside the tub had spoken out loud.

And whoever was speaking now continued to mumble as if they were drifting away. Stephanie could almost catch the words that appeared to originate, impossibly, from beneath the bathtub. She moved closer, swallowed the constriction in her throat, and knocked on the bath, hoping that would make it stop. 'Hello? Can you—'

The speaker either didn't hear her or ignored her and continued to talk in a quick stream of words, to herself, or to someone else she could not see. It was a woman urgently communicating something to someone that wasn't Stephanie.

On all fours, Stephanie moved her hands around the carpet at the base of the bath, though she wasn't sure what

she was looking for. A waft of wet rags and a hint of sewage buffeted her face. The room below must have a hole in the ceiling and she was overhearing a one-sided conversation or a television.

Stephanie's ear touched the side panel of the bath's surround.

'. . . before here . . . that time. Nowhere . . . to where the other . . . the cold . . . is my name?'

A television, it must be, or a radio play, overheard from a room beneath the bathroom. The voice had to be coming from below. She didn't want to believe it could be coming from anywhere else.

Stephanie gathered up her things and hurried into the warmer corridor of the first floor. She came to a standstill on the landing, sluggish with shock and bewilderment, and wondered what on God's earth she had moved into.

FOUR

When she left her room, dressed for work in boots, her last pair of smart black trousers and a white shirt under her coat, the interior of the house was still dark enough to require lights in the communal landings and on the staircase.

The ceiling lights were on timers and didn't remain switched on for long. They came on for a few seconds to reveal dated green wallpaper, torn down to plaster in places, or interspersed with long panels of newer paper, painted white. There were scuffed skirting boards and ancient wainscoting so thickly covered in paint it was impossible to determine the original decorative features. And if she was quick enough, she could reach the next circular light switch before the darkness fell with a horrible suddenness behind her. Not a building she would want to move through at night. She suppressed the thought.

Uncomfortably eager to leave the building, Stephanie jogged down the stairs. She wondered if she would ever have the courage to cross the threshold later when she finished work, even if it was just to collect her stuff and . . . *go where?*

As she turned into the last flight of uncarpeted stairs leading to the hall, she heard the scuffle of leather-soled

feet on the floor tiles: footsteps preceding the unlatching and the creak of the front door. It gave her a start until she realized it could be one of the other tenants leaving the building ahead of her. She sensed a man. But this place was for girls only, so maybe this was the landlord.

If she could share her experiences, she might receive an explanation about the noises in the house. Stephanie hurried down.

The front door closed before she made the bottom step. She raced along the ground floor passageway, the heels of her boots scraping and clattering across the tiles, to struggle with the front door.

Outside, the world was reluctant to reach whatever served for light in this grey time of year, but there was no one on the path and the gate was closed. She could not be that far behind whoever had just left the building.

On the short front path six wet rubbish bins stood sentinel on either side of the little rusty gate that rose as high as her hips. The rest of the front yard was a combination of broken paving slabs, litter and long weeds. Clumps of wet leaves, drooping from unkempt trees, flopped against the ground floor windows and concealed the lower storey of the house, which was why she hadn't noticed the security bars yesterday. Behind the ancient white cages of iron bars, all she could see behind the windows were black curtains. Rain rustled the pennants of crisp packets and plastic bags caught up in the unruly privet hedge that screened the front of the house from the street.

Gripped with a need for human contact, Stephanie unlatched the gate and stepped into Edgehill Road. Traffic from the T-junction at the end of the road became loud

around her head. She looked left and right. The streetlights glowed yellow and lit up the vertical descent of the rain that had fallen for hours. The road surface appeared oily, the cars heavy with a second skin of water, the trees tense with cold. The dim and miserable world was soaked but empty. So where had the man gone?

Stephanie looked at the house. Sooty red bricks running with dirty water. Black drainpipes. Old wooden sash window frames on the second floor, visible above the trees. Faded curtains. Only the top floor windows boasted venetian blinds. Not a flicker of light escaped the interior. The building appeared deserted. She could not recall it looking this way yesterday. Must be the light and weather, or her lack of sleep. Had the sun not briefly appeared for yesterday's viewing she doubted she would have even set foot inside.

Huddled into herself, with her head dipped from the rain, she made her way to the top of the road to find the bus stop and typed a quick text message to Ryan:

I'VE MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE [AGAIN!].
CAN YOU HELP ME?

FIVE

Stephanie arrived back at the house after seven. The rain continued to fall hard upon North Birmingham. The streetlights in Edgehill Road were spaced so far apart, and issued such thin light, they made the houses exude a vaguer, more inhospitable aspect than they had done that morning. Or perhaps they seemed menacing now that she had something to feel intimidated by. She wasn't sure. But she wondered if there had been any daylight here at all while she'd worked indoors at the vast Bullring shopping centre in the city, a world of steel, glass, marble, white electric light, and the trappings of affluence that ejected her into the rain once her day's servitude was complete.

The people she had worked with, and the location, had felt impersonal and never close to familiarity, as if to communicate the message: *Don't get used to it*. She couldn't help taking that to heart.

Usually she made friends on temp jobs, during the long hours of boredom and repetition that always felt more stressful than important work. In the past, she'd even exchanged phone numbers and email addresses with the other girls she'd worked with in warehouses, factories and while stewarding live events. But the bright lights and designer clothes shops of the Bullring had given airs to the

other two girls she'd worked with, an attitude demonstrated by many of the shoppers as if they were all accustomed to, and unimpressed by, the opulence. Her two colleagues both considered themselves to be models.

And what recession? Amongst crowds laden down with logo-emblazoned paper bags with string handles, expensive hair styles, new clothes, smart phones, the shopping centre had suggested an exclusive annexe existing beyond any world she was familiar with. While she had resorted to blacking-out the scuffs on her one pair of boots with an eyeliner pencil, others seemed to exist in effortless affluence. It mystified her like magic. Where were all the people, like her, who had no money? Were they hiding themselves away in wretched buildings like she was?

Beside the thirty-minute break, when she'd sat on a bench in the Bullring and watched silent news reports on a huge television screen about flooding in Cornwall, Yorkshire and Wales, she had been on her feet for the best part of eight hours. She'd become so tired she'd begun to slur her 'Hello, sir, would you like to try our new Italiano range of wrap? Only two hundred calories per . . .' She'd called two women 'sir', and the edges of her vision had started to flicker by late afternoon. She needed eight hours' sleep but had had less than three the night before. Her stomach burned with hunger.

Relief that the working day was over plummeted at the sight of the house. The building appeared wetter, grubbier and even more derelict than when she'd hurried away from it that morning. The whole place seemed sullen and eager to be left alone in the cold darkness. Whatever optimism and comfort the building once possessed

was long gone. The house's character seemed so obvious now.

Don't think like that.

She paused in the hallway to turn on the light and inspect the post: fliers for Asian mini-markets, fried chicken and pizza delivery services mingled with cards for local taxi companies. There was nothing addressed to the tenants, beside one final demand from British Gas for a Mr Bennet. Everything else in a white envelope was addressed to 'Dear Homeowner'.

Not having notified the bank or the doctor's surgery of her change of address was a small mercy. She'd do all of that when she found a new room in another building. And if she stood any longer looking at the faded walls, the uncarpeted stairs leading to the first floor, and the solitary closed door at the end of the ground floor hall, she worried she might not get up the stairs to her room.

Stick to the plan. She'd rehearsed it all day. *Eat, then go and see the landlord and give notice on the room. Ask if you can leave your bags here until Monday morning. Get your deposit back. Find a new place this weekend. Accept that the month's rent paid in advance might be gone, but still try to get a refund so you can stay in a cheap B&B over the weekend until you find a new room.*

If she could not get the rent back she would have to stay in the house until Monday.

Stop! Don't think about it . . . One thing at a time.

You can do it. You can do it. You can do it.

Reciting the silent mantra throughout the day to deter self-pity had felt absurd. But now she was back inside the

building, the house suggested the implacable, with an entrapping power that would drain any resistance to itself.

'It's what you make of it,' Knacker had said yesterday, grinning through his gappy teeth. But that was a cliché. It was incorrect. After six months away from the family home, she knew it was how these demoralizing places changed you that needed to be resisted. And she always resisted them. 'Character building', others might have said about her experiences. But that was also a cliché, and easy to say when it wasn't your character being built by adversity.

'You're a smart girl. And beautiful too. You'll make it all come right,' her dad once said after a dispiriting weekend together in Aberystwyth, when she knew she couldn't afford to go to university, no matter how good her A Levels had been.

Why didn't you come and see me the night you died, Daddy, and tell me what the fuck to do?

She briefly wondered what the ground floor was used for. Maybe it held tenants too? She hurried past the silent first floor and ran up the carpeted stairs to the second storey, slapping the lights on as she moved, running to the next switch before the lights behind her winked out.

She paused outside her room long enough to disappear into the abrupt darkness produced by the three-second timer on the overhead light reaching the end of its pathetic cycle. *What kind of mean bastard would try and save electricity like this?*

Only the ambient glow of a distant street lamp, seeping through the window on the stairwell between the first and second floors, offered any illumination.

Stephanie held the long room key lightly between her fingertips and listened intently.

All was silent on the other side of the door to her room.

She struggled to control her bottom lip's tremble when she recalled the tug and rustle of plastic beneath the bed, the mournful voice, the bed springs depressing as a new weight added itself to the mattress. *What happened in this room last night?*

Could the floorboards of an old building correct at night, as a building moved upon its foundations, to suggest a footfall? Had she heard a radio in another room, or a conversation, maybe someone talking to themselves? Were there mice under the bed? And what about the bathroom that morning? Was she losing her mind?

Schizophrenia. Psychosis.

Stephanie pushed the door to her room open with more force than she'd intended, and reached inside to slap the light on.