

The trilling of a ringing phone fills a tiny apartment, disturbing the neighbour who has just gotten her small child off to sleep. She counts the rings through the too thin walls, cringing with each one as she looks towards the closed bedroom door. It's nearly eleven at night. Who would ring at that time?

She hardly knows her neighbour. He's a young man, younger than her but not by much. He has the gangly look of a web developer or Internet geek, pale beyond words with flushed pink cheeks and fair hair the colour of sun-drenched wheat with a hint of strawberries. The sort who never tans because burning happens so fast.

She doesn't know what he does, although he used to leave the apartment often and was usually gone for long periods of time. She knows the movements of most of her neighbours because she doesn't have anywhere to go and nothing to distract her during the day. It's just her and the child—too young to be much company but old enough to be strong-willed and defiant.

It's all too cliched in her world. He'd gone out to meet some buddies at the pub. He'd be back later, he said. He'd not made eye contact when he'd said it, but not out of shame. He'd been callous, flippant. Standing suddenly to pull on his jacket, as if his 'friends' had telepathically invited him. Or, more likely, as if he suddenly realised he had a way out and he could take it.

That was three months ago. Three months of just her and the child. She leaves to get food, only the bare necessities of course, but otherwise she's in the apartment day and night, listening to the neighbours.

Eleven rings at eleven o'clock. The phone goes silent. Just the hum of the refrigerator now, the ticking of the clock on the wall. Not

a sound from the room off to her left. She realises she's been holding her breath and now she fills her lungs.

The ringing starts again. Her breath catches in her throat. One, two, three. Whoever it is really wants an answer. She tries to think about the last time she's heard a noise from the flat next door. Was it yesterday? Or the day before that?

Her ears twitch like a mouse, tuned finely to the needs of the child whether she likes it or not. A soft sound, like a questioning sigh. She squeezes her tired eyes shut as the ringing next door begins again and the small child wakes and fills his lungs to scream.

She moves quickly, opening the door and scooping him up before the banging from the apartment to the other side can start. They've complained six times already - threatening to take it up with the building management. Well, *he's* complained more than she has. He's a 'tough piece of work'. That's what her ex had said.

Ex? Is she thinking of him as that already? It has been three months, after all. She thinks of her parents and their harsh words and angry faces. "No good will come of it!"

"If you go with this man you are no daughter of mine." Her father in the doorway of her childhood home, surprisingly calm in his declaration. At the time she didn't understand how any parent could wish not to have their own child. She hates that he was right and the shame of it is what keeps her from going back home.

In his mother's arms, the child ceases crying almost instantly. He lets his head flop onto her bony shoulder, his arms relax at his sides. Next door, the ringing starts up again. That's the fourth try. She wonders if she should knock. He mightn't even be in. She can't imagine someone ignoring that loud, rattling ring four times.

The child snuffles, pushing his head into her neck. She strokes his hair, soft and dark like hers. As the phone begins ringing for the fifth time, she makes up her mind.

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“That’s damn kid is crying again.” He clenches his fist around his beer bottle, as though it were a can and he could crush it.

“He’s a kid. They cry.” Normally she wouldn’t be so bold in her retort but he’s distracted by his football, dozy from his beer. She knows he won’t lumber from his seat unless he feels he must.

“Fuckin’ thing wouldn’t cry if he was mine.” He says it to sound mean but his voice is distracted, his eyes following the tiny men on the big green field as they chase their ball.

She doesn’t have much fight in her either and knows that this won’t turn into one of their usual rows. She hates those, but at least she knows if they did, it wouldn’t wake up the baby next door.

She’s so envious of their neighbour. Here she is, nearly thirty and no child of her own. She looks at the hefty figure of her boyfriend—she couldn’t bear to call him her ‘partner’—and cringes at the thought of them making a child together.

Every time she sees their softly spoken neighbour she feels a pang. They don’t really talk and to be honest, their encounters have been few and far between. There was that time she was leaving the flat just as they were returning. Happy family. Father looking down at his son, stroking his hair and tickling under his chin. Mother fishing around for keys, glancing up to look at the father of her child.

She’d never heard the neighbours fight. She’d not heard much from next door for a while now. Just the baby crying every so often. That beautiful brown baby. There was a report on the telly that said kids like him were the future. Mixed babies everywhere now that the

social taboo of interracial marriage was history. She tried imagining herself with a mixed baby, wondering what sort of man the father would be if his culture was completely different from her own. Maybe she needs an Asian guy. She knew that they were supposed to expect their wives to be doting and submissive but she was good at that anyway. Well, maybe not the submissive bit. The doting bit was more for the sake of appeasement. She gave as good as she got when tempers flew.

She didn't think he'd watch the football or drink beer. Not an Asian one, anyway. She was pretty sure they didn't drink. Or some of them didn't. She'd have to get one of the ones who didn't drink.

She could even make curry, so that was good. The smell of it permeates the halls sometimes, coming from next door. She makes hers using those jars you can get in Costcutter. Easy as anything. Just cook up the ingredients and dump on the sauce. Serve it with a package of instant rice. She doesn't make it a lot, though. He's picky. Odd given that curry and football seemed to go hand in hand.

"I don't want that foreign muck," he would snort. Once she pointed out that he had no qualms about drinking their beer. *That* was a rip roaring row.

At least he doesn't hit her. Not like the last one. He's just loud. Loud is okay. Loud doesn't leave bruises. Loud doesn't need makeup or trips to the hospital under the guise of having 'fallen down the stairs'.

But it still makes her flinch sometimes. Makes her remember. That's probably why she yells back. It's a wall. A wall of anger behind which she can hide her fear. If he sees her shaking with rage, he won't see how scared she really is.

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The knocking is almost inaudible at first. Like a timid mouse. It's strangely different after the sharpness of the ringing. The flat is nearly silent, the silence like a cave around him. He has no clock ticking, no whirring computer hard drive or buzzing entertainment system. He's sure the fridge makes a noise but it's in the other room, far away.

The knocking grows a bit louder now. He wonders if he should get it, if moving is actually an option or if his muscles have atrophied. He doesn't think they could in such a short period of time, but you never know. In fact, when he tries to remember, he's uncertain about how long it's been since he's moved. Maybe it's not been so short after all.

He is surprised to have so many thoughts suddenly flowing through his head. He's gotten used to not thinking anything. He wonders if that's what it's like to be a Buddhist, if they can just turn off their thoughts. He wasn't sure if that's how it works.

The noise is out of his mouth before he realises it's him who's made it. He thinks he was trying to say hello or some similar greeting, but it comes out as a hoarse gargle. His throat is sore and dry and as he lifts his head, he feels it throbbing.

His flat is dark, the only light coming from the very small slit under the door to the hall. He can see the shadow of the person knocking, blocking the light from coming in.

"Go away." His voice is cracked. It sounds like a dead thing, a broken thing. He swallows hard and squeezes his eyes shut against the pain in his head. Now that he's moving, even if it's ever so slightly, his muscles begin to cry out.

"I...is everything all right?" asks a woman, her voice small and far-away.

Is everything all right? He smiles. No. No, everything is not all right. No. A person does not lie down on their futon couch and not move if everything is all right. A person doesn't neglect their basic needs, eating, drinking, going to the toilet, if everything is all right.

He rolls over onto his side and stretches his legs. "Go away."

This time his voice is softer, not nearly so cracked. He wonders if they heard but knows they must have when, a moment later, the shadowy feet move away from the door. He rolls onto his stomach, hoping the pressure of the futon will silence its calling of hunger. He wants to sleep again, sleep like he has been since he got home. When he's awake, he thinks too much and if he's thinking, he remembers.

He doesn't want to remember. He just wants it all to go away. He wants it to be like it was before. He wants to get his life back.

His mother's voice comes into his head, soft but firm. "Time heals everything. But you have to be patient."

Time. But time is relative and if you keep remembering over and over again, it's like time hasn't gone anywhere. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe there are some things that time can't heal. They're just too big, too incredibly painful.

His eyes are stinging, thick with sleep, but he closes them anyway. He closes them because when he does, time goes back and he's happy again. He's in love and he's being loved and all that's fucked up and wrong with the world hasn't touched him yet.

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The morning dawns bright and beautiful. She loves that her window faces South East. Even if she couldn't go out in it, at least she could still enjoy the weather when it was pleasant like this.

She's been up since five and watched the sun rise. The days are getting shorter, but not noticeably so yet. Her heart aches as she thinks about her boy leaving her again. She's proud of him, she is. She just wishes he'd wanted to go to school a little nearer.

She's a creature of habit. She supposes it comes naturally with old age. Her grandmother and mother had been the same way when they'd reached her age, or near enough anyway. She's outlived them both now. Her ma died at seventy-three, her nan at seventy. She'll be seventy-nine next month.

"Good innings," her doctor would say.

"Good innings," she mutters to herself. She reaches for one cane and then the other, hooking her elbows in and heaving her short but stocky frame out of her chair. Her boy wants to get her one of those fancy electric chairs that lifts a person up out of them but she's told him to save his money for school.

"I'll come up with a cure for you, mum. I'll do it." He'd kissed the top of her head and patted the hair down. Silvery hair now, kept short as she can't put it in cornrows like she had when she was young. Her fingers are curled with arthritis, useless for tasks that involve any amount of detail or precision. She doesn't have the heart to tell him a cure for old-age isn't possible.

Still, he's a good boy to have offered and a good boy to trust that she'll still be around when he's a fully qualified surgeon.

She shuffles over to the kitchen counter, an obstacle-free path for her stiff figure. She likes to line tea bags up on the counter so she doesn't have to work too hard to get them out of the box. Her boy was sweet, having gone through them to separate the pairs.

"You should get PG-Tips, Mum—they're not stuck together like this. They'd be easier for you to pick up, too."

But she likes her Yorkshire builder's tea. PG-Tips is weak. She needs to use twice as many bags to get a cup the way she likes it. She takes her tea strong, a dash of milk and a spoonful of sugar.

The kettle's already full, her mug sitting on the counter where her boy had left it. He really is a good boy. She wishes he knew how proud she is of him, no matter what.

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He looks at the back of the Estate Agent's head as they drive along. She's talking - he can tell that much, even if he can't make out the words. Her head bobbles around and her hands move quite a bit, although they stay close to the steering wheel. He grunts responses. The woman's tiresome and he just wants to be home - his home - but that simply isn't going to happen.

Next to him the care-worker smiles, a look of pity on her face. Always pity. He's tired of it. It's like being an infant but with an understanding that everyone thinks you're utterly helpless. At least an infant actually is helpless. It's not like he's in diapers.

He's actually quite proud of his health. Until his hearing started to go, he'd been fit as a fiddle. As it is, that's the only thing that's bothering him and most of the time it doesn't.

The care worker doesn't know. He's careful not to let on. He looks away, smiling and nodding to the front seat.

The Estate Agent continues talking, not really bothered as to whether or not anyone's listening. He suspects she's Italian. She uses her hands, has that passion not unlike his wife. It was a shame she was an Estate Agent then and not a good wife to a good Italian man. Of course, it isn't like the old days. Women now, they want independence. They want the husband to stay at home with the child - if they want a child at all!



He knows how it is, knows what sort of grief his own daughter has put him through. Is still putting him through. His son, he had been a good boy. Would have been a good man.

The car swings around a roundabout and turns down a side street. The Estate Agent stops abruptly in front of a block of new build apartments. "Here we are!"

He hears that all right, her face turned, her tone perky. He smiles. The Care Worker pats his knee. "Right then. Shall we go take a look?"

The apartment is tiny. The kitchen and sitting room are one, with no room for the large oak table currently sitting in his dining room at home. There's a bathroom, a bedroom and a small second room which he can't imagine acting as more than a large closet. Besides that, he saw the woman in the flat across leaving with a baby in a stroller.

"The baby will keep me awake. And I smelled curry."

The Care Worker gives him a look he's seen often. He doesn't understand why she looks at him like that. As though he is a child who has spoken out of turn. He wonders why all these women have so much power over his life. Strangers, all of them.

The Estate Agent doesn't seem to notice his protests. "It's really delightful. And it faces Southeast so this apartment gets a lot of sun. It will be just like being back in Italy!"

"I hate the sun," he says. She turns away, saying something else, and once again his ears fail him. He shrugs, turning back to the Care Worker, but she has wandered into the bedroom.

"It comes with a fridge, washer/dryer, and even a dishwasher which, for this size of apartment, is quite a nice bonus. Especially for someone such as yourself." the Estate Agent looks at him as

she speaks. He nods, accepting he is not going to be listened to anymore than he can hear.

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She stretches and rolls over, coming quickly to the edge of her single mattress. Reaching out from her warm duvet, she grabs her phone to check the time. It isn't yet nine.

Rolling onto her back, she yawns, stretching her arms up over her head and pushing them against the wall. She points her toes, flexing each ankle. She's actually feeling pretty good.

She pushes the covers down so they bunch around her waist, exposing her bare skin to the cool air of her room. Cool because she'd left her window cracked open. Normally the flat would be excruciating this time of the morning, especially with the sun as bright as it is. A chill wind had blown in last night, a sign of the changing seasons and the fast approaching school year.

In some ways she's eager to start back. An idle summer, with a brief weekend city break to Berlin, has left her feeling more listless than ever. She sometimes wonders what, exactly, she's doing here in this larger-than-life city.

The pleasant smell of coffee drifts in under the crack where her door doesn't quite meet the floor. That would be one of the roommates. Hard to tell which one. Either he nagged her into making it or he resigned to getting it himself. Either way, she knows that there will be one cup left over once the two of them had had theirs. There always is.

It's like their way of thanking her for doing all the cooking. They both have to work—needing the extra cash to pay for expenses student loans don't cover. Between study and work they have little time and during the summer they've filled their days with extra shifts, squirrelling cash away for the leaner school months.

She is grateful for the reliable income from her parents—monthly deposits into an account and the substantial savings of her college fund that allowed her the opportunity to study abroad. It means she is able to lie in, stay out late, and enjoy the summer without financial worries looming.

She doesn't mind that all the household chores fall to her when the school year begins, the other two too tired to contribute much. She's not lazy. She also fully appreciates how fortunate she is to have so much provided to her. She can see it on the faces of her flatmates, the stress involved in paying your own way, having student loans, and being faced with a very harsh reality of ten to fifteen years debt, if they're lucky.

One, the boy, is studying design. He's quite talented and quite anal. He's neat, organised, and detail orientated. The girl is slovenly, forgetful, and rather lazy about everything outside of her school work. She's studying fine art. Both are at Chelsea but on different campuses.

There's a sudden tap at her door. She pulls the blanket up around her, propping herself up on one elbow. "Come in."

The boy pops his head around the edge of the door, a small smile on his lips. "Hiya. Coffee?"

"Yes please!" She sits up further, allowing him to bring the steaming mug to her. He blushes slightly, able to see her bare shoulders. She thinks it's cute. He's a bashful boy, very sweet and thoughtful, practically like a girl. He slips out, pulling her door to as he goes.

He's her type, actually, when boys are her interest. But she has no intention of going there as she knows too well the mess that would cause. It was such a of mess that had landed her in London. No, she thinks as she sips her coffee, her romantic escapades are over.

She's simply not going to allow her heart to be broken ever again and the surest way to do that is to never fall for anyone.