

Thrum
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I don't know what time it is. The alarm hasn't stung me. What's stolen me from a joyless sleep are the three brothers next door arguing over a plastic spinning toy.

Rolling over, my mouth tastes like the inside of a carrier bag. The metal catch on yesterday's bra nips my spine.

Soon, the toddlers' whines turn to outraged wails. Making a fist, I imagine breaching the plaster, bricks, and mortar to punch them square in their soft, little mouths so hard that it knocks them out their football team bedspreads and out through their bedroom window. When guilt spikes, they land on the trampoline in the back garden. Once they're trapped behind the high mesh walls of the safety cage, the darkness is mine for a while longer.

An hour later, the radio alarm crows about a breakdown on the M77; the only route into work. So, my ablutions start with screaming into a pillow and 20mg of Citalopram.

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The rain-soaked motorway fizzles with rush hour traffic as I exit the M77. Pulling into work, aiming for the usual spot - two spaces to the left of the zebra crossing at the main entrance - a white Kia sails in ahead of me. Stabbing the clutch and brake, my service station coffee hurls itself over the edge of the cup. I give them a vigorous two-fingered salute, which they ignore. So I reverse slowly, rev the engine, and speed forwards into the space next to them with a predator's red-faced grimace, all incisors on show, ready to tear out their throats. They look now. Arms out, palms up. What's my problem? What's your problem?

I can't trust my impulse control. I want to void my bowels on their windscreen or at least gouge their paintwork with a nail file.

In the rear-view mirror, I investigate the lines around my mouth. A dumpy, white-haired woman in a leather jacket chooses that moment to exit the Kia; all chunky thighs and tan tights. Her pastel, high-street blouse is under siege from her monstrous tits. The driver's far younger. The skinny adolescent - probably the daughter - is all ripped jeans with a white stripe bleached into her side-parting.

They lock the Kia and hurry towards Tesco at the opposite end of the shopping centre. I want them to trip over a bush and imagine their chins smiling open, their blood spritzing across the wet tarmac like a Jackson Pollock number. Who do Miss Skunk-head-ripped-jeans and Ms Squishy-tits McChunky-thighs think they are? I work here.

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My kitten heels click-clack across the shopping centre tiles. Cringing at my reflection in the store fronts, I check my watch and manage a curt, 'Good morning,' to the boy at the pop-up phone accessories stall. What's he got to be chirpy about? I've got knicker stains older than him.

Roll on six thirty.

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Lindsay in Beauty is back. She forces a smile as I cross the threshold, knowing not to speak to me before lunchtime. Especially today. That's it, Blondie. Look away. Line up your perfume samples and your hairdryers. This is as good as your life gets.

I dash through Jewellery only to slow down around Childrenswear, still swallowing the fug of designer perfumes. A white, cotton sleepsuit in the centre display arrests me. It makes my arms feel heavy, empty. While I imagine tossing the tiny thing onto a bonfire, an anxious Ruth waves to me from Womenswear.

'Hurry up,' she mouths, her high cheek bones and tight bun accentuating the severity of her death stare.

'Coming,' I grunt, biting my cheek so as not to mention the lines of Golden Beige foundation cemented across her forehead.

Today's red leather handbag doesn't match her shoes. I picture strangling the woman until her wheelie-bin-green eyes pop out her head and roll under the sales counter. Then I'd say, 'Ruth, sweetie, for a personal shopper, your fashion sense is gash.'

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To-do list is complete. Clothes are collated from across the designers: all the velvet, cotton, lambswool, chiffon, and lace needed for an Autumnal wardrobe. This morning, it's for a middle-aged pregnant divorcee, and then a young widow. There could be commission on Christmas partywear, if I steer them right.

They drink the complimentary fake wine and learn about the most stylish cuts and fabrics; how to flatter their curves and amplify their assets.

'Give this a try,' I say, presenting the first with a grey, satin pencil dress. 'You'll see its matching three-quarter-length coat frames you perfectly...reduced to £175...'

'What about this?' I tell the next client. 'Cranberry, polyester jumpsuit. Contrasting cap sleeves. Match it with a new pair of strappy sandals for that extra height...'

Each woman poses in the full-length mirrors before rejecting my art with a casual, 'Aye, hen, but it's just no me.'

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Lunchtime. Sandwiches and Propranolol in the car. I could go the long way back to the shop entrance - past Gifts & Toys - or I could brave it and pass Childrenswear again. That means facing Dev, who knows what today is.

‘Lighten up,’ he’ll say.

And I’ll say, ‘Watch me lighten your face by ripping off your ears and wearing them as a necklace.’

Tightening my fists, I stride past the baby shoes and designer bibs. ‘Mummy’s Little Princess’ is not going to win, not this year. But soon, the vinyl walkway is in the distance and I’m weaving between racks until that damned sleepsuit is there in front of me. Staring at its terrible, empty, fur-lined feet, I stroke the yellow chick on its chest. ‘Just Hatched’, it reads underneath. Like a passenger in my own brain, I snatch the sleepsuit from its hanger and tuck it into my blouse.

Dev’s at the store entrance. I stall. He’s boring Lindsay again while she stands out front wafting cardboard perfume samples at customers. As if she’d be interested in Dev’s golf handicap or his bank account?

Their mouths drop as I speed towards the security barriers and set off the alarms.

Click-clacking out of the shopping centre, I stare down every pedestrian in my path and imagine their heads exploding like fireworks in single and multiple illuminated bursts. Back in the car, I break.

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Dev taps the window. I’m still nursing the sleepsuit across my shoulder.

‘Hannah, let me in...’

There’s no sharp edge, just warm resignation in his voice, which is worse. If he’d shouted, got my back up...

I tap off the central locking.

‘Please don’t...’ I cry, expecting barbs.

But he installs himself in the front passenger seat. No bad jokes. No snippy remarks. Just the perfect gift, silence. There’s nothing left to argue about or blame each other for.

It takes a while, but my whole body unclenches. Dev judges it safe then to reach out and guide my head onto his shoulder, one last time.

‘I feel it too,’ he says, squeezing my hand.

At the tenderness, I bury my nose in the sleepsuit and imagine it swelling with kicking, breathing flesh. A silent howl begins inside my head.

‘Dev, if we didn’t have sex that night...’

He takes his hand back.

‘We’ve been over this, Hannah,’ he sighs, ‘so many times.’

I imagine garrotting him with the seatbelt until silence and distance filter back into the car.

‘Get off,’ I bark at him.

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Dev slopes towards the ‘Staff Only’ area with the sleepsuit protruding from his trouser pocket.

‘Back shortly,’ he says in his managerial way, as if we’d never been intimate, never once Christened the sofa in his office.

No doubt he’s scrubbing mascara off the baby clothes in the gents while, all the while, cursing me for my ‘drama’. He promised to sneak it back onto its little hanger. It’ll be like it never happened.

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‘Better get a move on,’ says Ruth on my return to Womenswear. ‘Your last appointment-’

‘Thanks,’ I say, cutting her off.

‘I covered the others,’ she snaps, ‘if you want to say thanks?’

I want to rip out her tongue and kick her into the display cabinets, and see her impaled by shards of streak-free glass.

‘What are you smiling at?’ says Ruth.

‘Nothing.’

And here it comes,

‘Get over your bloody self,’ she says, stamping down cardboard boxes for recycling.

‘We’re women. We’ve all...’

My head feels stuffed with fibreglass.

‘Fuck you,’ I seethe, inside and out.

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Sounds are powerful. One moment I’m in the present with the client, then one clash of metal curtain rings later, and I’m not here. My mouth makes professional introductions to the cross-legged woman on the dark purple chaise longue, but my head is lost.

On opening the dressing room curtain, I’m back in hospital. It’s visiting hour. On standing up to use the commode, something inside me lets go. There’s a short, hard smack,

like ice-cream hitting the pavement. An angry-red mass drops onto the lino. Nurses haul the bedside curtains closed behind them, uttering soothing, but well-practiced words. Soft pats on my back. Encouragement to lie down. Assurances everything will be fine.

‘Common in first-time pregnancies,’ they say.

The memory hits and I breathe into it until it passes, digging my nails into my palms until the waves subside.

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‘Night,’ says Lindsay on my way out.

She gives me a look, willing me to hang back.

‘You probably heard they took the left ovary after the you-know-what?’ she whispers.

Department stores are usually like small villages.

‘Oh,’ I say, a little winded. ‘Nobody said...’

‘That’s why I was off for so long.’

‘Ah.’

‘Thought you’d understand?’

‘Err, yes. Sorry,’ I stutter, and then I’m squeezing her arm a little, one could-have-been-mum to the other.

She returns the act of solidarity by pulling up her shirt sleeve to reveal a small tattoo on her wrist. It’s a loop of pink ribbon that changes colour halfway through into powder-blue. The tag below it reads ‘Angel’. I want to grab a wire brush and scrub off that cursive lettering until her skin dissolves. But I get it. I get her and, in doing so, it brings me out of myself a little. It’s a start.

‘Take care,’ I say, this time meaning it.