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For
Felicity Riddy

PROLOGUE

As far as Morgan Byrd was concerned, the story began when Alka-Seltzer went missing; but in the weeks leading up to his disappearance, four other women found themselves increasingly troubled by recurrent dreams, while one small boy was awake after midnight and busy with a secret mission.

A darkness of creepers and branches hiding the more luminous darkness of the sky. The rapid scuttle of a lizard. The smell of her own fear, acrid on her skin. The elderly woman stirring restlessly on the bed is restored by the grip of her dreaming mind to the youthful vigour of fifty years ago, a vigour which inside the dream is all expressed in a tense and desperate stillness. Her senses are alert to catch a sound, a sight, a scent which may warn her of approaching danger. As she crouches, every muscle taut, she is panting silently. Her heart thuds against her side.

There are flashes of light, now, in the darkness. The whiplash crack of gunshots. The crackle and dusky glow of flames. She begins to slither cautiously on her belly, holding her breath as if it were a spell to conjure silence, back towards the huts. Back towards the heart of the nightmare. As she nears the clearing, the screaming begins.

She wakes to the familiarity of pain, lived with so long by now that it is almost reassuring. She accepts it, as she accepts her pounding heart and sweat-drenched skin. The nightmare, too, is something that she has lived with for most of a lifetime. Sometimes months go by without its returning, but the decision she has recently made has brought it back in all its original vividness and terror. She knows that, until she has completed the task she has set herself, it will visit her nightly. This too she accepts.

Easing herself painfully out of bed, she reaches for her stick, pulls on her dressing-gown. Sitting at the kitchen table, her hands clasped for warmth round a mug of tea, she faces the future and renews her determination. Unconsciously, as she summons up her forces to meet what is to come, her face clenches into the implacable grimace of a tribal mask.

The sickly whimper and burning forehead of the child. Back and forth, back and forth in the darkened bedroom, carrying

that fragile burden, murmuring to him, trying to soothe him into stillness. The darkness without matching the darkness within, an arid, empty blackness where once a great light shone. The refusal of her struggling mind to relinquish the loved thing that her arms enfold. He cannot ask it of me. He cannot. He cannot ask it of me.

She no longer knows whether she is arguing with God or with the man she is trying not to wake. The man in the double bed, the man by whose side she has slept for all these years. Barren years, and now the fruit of her aging womb, the firstling of her heart, is to be torn away from her. Worse, is to be sacrificed by her own hand. And she cannot do it.

No, it is not even that she cannot. She will not. She refuses. She will not do it. Love and anger conspire within her to cast out faith. She will not consent to the sacrifice. Like Lucifer, she will not serve.

She wakes to hear the echo of her own voice screaming, 'He's not yours, I tell you. I don't even know who his father is. You've got no part in him. He's not your son.'

She is walking down the aisle of an enormous supermarket, searching the shelves with feverish anxiety for something she has forgotten, something nameless and desperately needed which she knows she cannot live without for even a moment longer.

The objects on the shelves shift and dissolve under her gaze. Faceless shoppers block her way as if from deliberate malice. The aisle divides into a labyrinth of pathways. Impatience and rising panic thrust her on.

Neon lighting glares down coldly on the scene like light reflected from snow. As if that chill illumination has summoned it up, she finds herself gazing into an enormous cold cabinet. The thing she has been searching for is lying in the bottom of it, swaddled and white and still.

As always, the nightmare fails to wake her. She turns over in her sleep, letting the oblivion which lies between dreams wipe away the image, absorbing its horror back into her subconscious mind.

In her dream, the girl is lying awake in the same narrow bed in which she fell asleep. Around her, the room is familiar and calm. She sees the desk with its orderly array of notebooks and pens, the books ranged neatly on their shelves, the posters pinned to the wall. There is nothing here to threaten. She is safe in the present tense.

Somehow, though, her bed has become twisted around. She ought to be facing the curtained square of the window. Instead she is staring at the door, a door which begins to open, slowly, slowly. She feels fear run through her veins like freezing

water. Her heart seizes up. Her mouth opens into a black oblong, as wide as the black oblong of that gaping doorway. Her own silent scream is choking her, but she dare not let it out.

His whisper is in the room with her, intimate, caressing, obscene. She becomes aware, as his voice engulfs her, that her bed has the high, hinged sides of a cot.

As he does now every night, the boy wakes and feels in the darkness for the borrowed and hidden old iPod and headphones. Careful not to make a noise, he climbs out of bed, thin and bony in his striped pyjamas, and pads barefoot over to the window-seat. Sitting up very proud and straight, soundlessly mouthing the syllables, familiar by now in their strangeness, he wills himself to listen and remember.

Outside, on the moon-streaked rooftops, a cat yowls its barbaric song. Alka-Seltzer, blissfully unaware that his rapidly approaching fate is to be the stuff of national headlines, is acting out his normal springtime urges of passion and conquest.

CHAPTER ONE

Morgan Byrd ranked sleep pretty high on the list of the major sensual pleasures of life, and unlike the rest of the list you didn't even need to be conscious to enjoy it. On this particular morning she was dragged reluctantly up from its downy depths by the sound of Lin's voice, toneless and loud and horribly insistent, repeating her name. Her spoken name, which Lin hardly ever used except at moments like this. Signing, for all its undoubted eloquence, cannot penetrate slumber.

Morgan peeled her eyelids apart and looked at the old-fashioned alarm clock which stood on a tin tray on the bedside chest. Lin was standing next to it, holding out a plate and a mug in hands already streaked with paint. She had probably been working since half past six. She looked amazingly beautiful. Morgan looked at her with exasperation mixed with desire.

'For God's sake, Lin,' she said crossly, 'it's the bleeding dawn. It's Saturday. It's the vacation. It's ...' Memory returned, and with it a rush of panic. 'Oh Christ, it's that conference! Why the hell didn't you wake me?' Even as she

said it, she dimly recalled punching the alarm clock into silence at some half-conscious moment in the recent past.

Lin's face said, 'Why do I put up with you?' She dumped the plate and mug on the chest. Her hands said, 'Drink your coffee, Bird. And get a move on, you're late.' Her face said, 'I love you.' She left the room.

Morgan took a gulp of coffee. It was extra strong and extra sweet, Lin's way of kick-starting her into the day. Morgan said, 'Jewish mother, yet,' and wandered through into the bathroom, still clutching the mug. She inspected her bleary reflection in the mirror, sluiced her face with cold water, brushed her teeth, took another gulp of coffee. A nasty combination of flavours, but at least she was now awake.

Back in the bedroom she dressed fast – blue jeans, silk shirt, velvet jacket, earrings, high-heeled boots. She ran her fingers through her short hair, took the stairs two at a time, grabbed the folder with her conference paper from the kitchen dresser, glanced at her watch. She would just make it.

Starting the car, she wondered for the thousandth time why she had let Lin persuade her into living in this God-forsaken spot. Yearning for city streets and their unnatural grime, she drove through the budding and burgeoning green of the spring landscape towards the coast and the university campus.

She arrived at the Arts Building with less than ten minutes in hand. She had meant to use them to take a quick glance

through her paper, but instead she was waylaid by Collington, the university porter.

‘Morning, Dr Byrd, miss. I was wanting a word.’

Morgan sighed and glanced at her watch. ‘Can’t it wait, whatever it is? I’m due at a conference session.’

‘Gender and role-play in thingummy wotsit, is that, miss? I’m just on my way to unlock the room. The other young ladies mostly isn’t here yet. But I was hoping to catch you, see. It’s that Alka-Seltzer. He’s gone missing again. So if you could maybe keep an eye out for him.’

Alka-Seltzer was the campus cat. He was a large, unneutered ginger tom whose tattered ears attested to the riotous nights and worse for wear mornings-after from which he had got his name.

‘He’ll come home when he feels like it, surely. He always has before.’

‘Well yes, miss,’ said Collington doubtfully. ‘Only it’s that young Oliver, see. He will have it as he’s been kidnapped, miss.’

‘Ollie Cresswell?’ Morgan was unable to keep the irritation out of her voice. ‘Don’t tell me Daphne has taken to arranging classes for him in the vac, now.’

‘No, miss. Not that I know of.’ Collington’s voice was complacent with the certainty that very little went on around the university without his being aware of it. ‘He’s been coming

in mornings to feed Alka-Seltzer, being as Dr Blair-Guthrie's in South America.'

Nobody owned Alka-Seltzer, but years ago he had chosen to take up residence with the venerable Dr Elspeth Blair-Guthrie in her campus flat. And since the idea of Alka-Seltzer in a cattery was unthinkable, someone always had to be found to feed him whenever Elspeth was away. Morgan thanked her lucky stars that this time it wasn't her.

She said, 'He can't have been catnapped. Who on earth could possibly want him? Ollie's just looking for attention. But I'll keep an eye out anyway. Look, shouldn't you be unlocking the lecture-theatre? It's nearly half past.'

'I'll see to it right away, miss.'

Morgan drove home at the end of the afternoon in an unreasonably bad mood. The first day of the early feminist fiction conference had been a complete success and her own rather provocative paper on the polarisation of female roles in Robert Bage's *Hermesprong* had produced both a flatteringly heated debate and an offer of publication in a quite prestigious women's studies journal; yet she was feeling as scratchy and irritable as Alka-Seltzer after a hard night on the tiles.

The thought of Alka-Seltzer seemed to crystallise her discontent. Over sixty years of feminist struggle, she told

herself crossly (or over two hundred and sixty years, depending on when you started counting), and you still had an entire university campus making a mascot out of a wretched tomcat simply because it embodied all the worst excesses of stereotypically male behaviour. Not to mention the absence of most of her own male colleagues from any conference which involved women's issues. Like the one she had just been attending.

Morgan swung the car into the narrow road which ran through Hangman's Wood. The sight of the trees with their dense undergrowth of flowering weeds reminded her of Lin. Lin, with her quietness, her stillness, her calm certainty about who she was and what she wanted, her honesty. Morgan realised that she had been deceiving herself about the causes of her ill temper. It was not so much the absence of her male colleagues as the presence of one of them. Or rather, of one of them and his baby.

Rupert Allison was the latest of Morgan's male colleagues to discover the belated joys of parenthood. To Morgan's jaundiced eye, the entire campus seemed to be full of first-time fathers in their forties – her age, for God's sake – ostentatiously toting their wriggling infants, which invariably ended up on the knee of some passing female administrator or girl undergraduate. A baby was the new designer accessory, and it came with a whole new set of attitudes. Rupert had been

annoying enough as a thoroughly Caucasian critic of post-colonial literature. Now he had become, however briefly, if not a male feminist at least a fellow traveller of feminism, and here he was at a women's studies conference to prove it. His small babe, sleeping sweetly in its baby sling throughout the proceedings, had ensured him a constant flutter of attention from radical sisters not nearly as hard line as they looked.

But it wasn't only Rupert. Despite the success of her paper, Morgan had felt at odds with the whole occasion. Was it that living with Lin, learning her language, had begun to exile Morgan from the fake complexities of academic discourse, or was it simply that Lin had never felt that earnest need to theorise her own experience? Lin, Morgan realised enviously, had never in her life had to listen to six papers in succession on the precursors of Jane Austen, let alone give one.

Thinking, much more cheerfully now, about how she detested Jane Austen, whose narrow range of narrative possibilities still straitjacketed the minds, and indeed the lives, of her female readers, Morgan took the turning which led to the cottage. It was only as she parked the car that she remembered the other baby which ought to have been at the conference, Rosalind's baby.

Rosalind Gilbert was one of Morgan's graduate supervisees, a rather earnest and anxious young woman who seemed haunted by the awareness that her own work, on the

passage of time in the novels of Samuel Richardson, paled into insignificance beside that of her husband. Morgan recalled that there was a television programme this weekend about Andrew Gilbert and his brother; she must remember to watch it. And also to give Rosalind a ring sometime and check she was all right. She had an idea that the baby was rather fragile; hadn't it spent its first two months in an incubator?

And wasn't there something else she had promised to do? Trying to remember what it was, Morgan made her way down the overgrown garden towards Lin's painting-shed, the desire she had felt briefly that morning beginning to stir inside her.