

The Edge

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Extract

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One

Jon Spicer felt himself slowly emerging from the depths. He kept his eyes shut and let the urge to stretch take him. Cool sheets brushed against his knuckles as his arms straightened out.

The sound of giggling froze his movement – the noise was too far away for his daughter to be in her room. It was only a few weeks ago that Holly had progressed to a junior bed and the freedom it gave her meant she frequently rose early to explore the house with no adult watching over her. His wife laughed back and he realised they were both downstairs. He patted the other side of the bed to confirm it was empty.

Hand lingering where Alice usually lay, he registered the smell of coffee and opened his eyes to a room bathed in a warm glow. Turning to the curtains, he saw cracks of sunlight forcing their way in, refusing to be denied their spell of dominance over the dark. His mind turned to the previous night. Thank God, he thought, no nightmares disturbed me. That must be getting on for two months now. Maybe, he hoped, time has finally worn the memories down so they are no longer able to sour my sleep.

He blinked, savouring the sense of relief. Sunday morning and not back on duty for three days. The thought released a burst of energy into his limbs and he climbed swiftly out of bed to draw the curtains. The sun had just cleared the tops of the houses opposite and the street was totally quiet. Come on, the day seemed to beckon. You've missed part of me already.

Alice was sitting at the kitchen table, Holly in her high seat opposite. His wife's lips were pressed against the top of an egg, and as her cheeks puffed out, a long drool of slime began to emerge from a hole in its base.

‘Morning.’ He smiled, tying the waistband of a frayed bathrobe as he entered the room.

‘Daddy!’ Holly cried, waving her plastic spoon with delight. A clump of soggy cereal flew off and Punch, the family dog, snaffled it up the instant it made contact with the floor. The Boxer raised his head, stump of a tail wagging, brown eyes glued to his master.

Jon looked back at Alice. ‘What are you doing?’

She lifted her face from the egg and a burst of air shot out from her collapsing cheeks. ‘Blowing it, of course.’ He raised an eyebrow suggestively and she batted a hand in his direction. ‘Not unless you do a heck of a lot more housework.’

He grinned. ‘And why are you doing that?’

‘Because you can’t decorate an egg while it’s still full of yolk, anyone knows that.’

Of course, Jon thought, suddenly remembering their arrangements. It was Easter Sunday and they were heading over to Lyme Park, the enormous National Trust estate south of Manchester. Apart from an egg-painting competition, there was an egg hunt and an egg-rolling competition down a slope in the landscaped grounds. After that, it was over to his mum and dad’s for a Sunday roast.

She pushed a cup of coffee towards him. ‘I was about to bring it up to you.’

He regarded his family, wishing his arms were long enough to stretch around everyone at once. Instead, he placed a hand on Punch’s head, tickling behind the dog’s ears as he stooped to kiss his daughter’s cheek. He stepped behind her and crouched before his wife, lifting a strand of blonde hair from her face before letting his fingers trail down her arm and on to her stomach. ‘How’s you and the sprout?’

‘We’re fine.’ She smiled, cupping a hand over his. ‘Both of us slept well.’

He pressed his palm lightly against her stomach. Three months pregnant and Alice thought she could just feel the flutter of their next child’s kicks within her. He kept his hand there, feeling the usual sense of wonder and delight. Centimetres from his

palm were the beginnings of another little person. Not much as yet, but in around six months' time, a fully formed baby would emerge. There isn't much else in the world, he thought, that genuinely deserves to be called a miracle.

'Good,' he replied, straightening up to look at the saucepan on the hob. 'Boiled eggs for breakfast?'

'No,' Alice said, lifting Holly out of her seat. 'They're for the egg-rolling competition.'

As he watched the spherical objects bumping around in the boiling water, his mobile phone started to ring. Holly ran across the room, plucked it from the shelf above the radiator and flipped it open. 'Hello? Hello? Me Holly. Who you? Who you?'

Grinning, Jon reached down and coaxed it from her grip. Some number on the screen with a weird area code: 01297. Where the hell was that? 'Jon here.'

'Hello, who is this please?'

'DI Spicer,' he replied, his voice lowering as he sensed the call was work related.

'DI? You're a policeman?' A note of relief was in the stranger's voice.

'I am.' A faint feeling of unease caused him to turn away from his daughter's upturned face. 'Who am I speaking to?' From the edge of his vision he could see Alice was motionless, eyes on him, too.

'This is Superintendent Mallin, Derbyshire police. And you're with?'

'Greater Manchester Police. Major Incident Team. What's this about?'

There was a pause. 'We've just recovered a phone. I don't want to alarm you but ... erm ... this is very awkward.'

Jon felt a pang of irritation. His Sunday off and here was some uniform from Derbyshire being all vague with him. 'I'm not following you here. You've recovered a phone and it had this number in it?'

'That's correct. You are down in the address book as Big Bro.'

Trepidation welled up. Our kid. What the hell has he done

now? ‘I have a younger brother called Dave. Sounds like you’ve got his phone. Where are you calling from?’

‘Haverdale.’

Haverdale. One of the towns in the Peak District National Park. Jon remembered driving out to play their rugby team a few years back. Big meaty farmers who kept it in the pack, trying to maul their way slowly up the pitch. What was Dave up to out there? ‘You say you’ve recovered the phone. What do you mean?’

The other officer coughed needlessly. A delaying tactic to precede bad news. Jon looked down at the eggs jostling among the bubbles. The shell of one had cracked and a nodule of white bulged out.

‘As I said, there’s been an incident. I think we may need you to come out here.’

‘What sort of an incident?’

‘We’ve recovered a body.’

Oh Jesus. The sound of boiling water seemed to be getting louder. ‘Description?’

‘An adult male. Thirty or thereabouts. Of thin build, signs of intravenous drug use, but not recent.’

Following repeated clashes with their dad, Dave had been thrown out of the family home in his late teens. He’d ended up living in squats, sliding into a life of petty crime and drug use. The last time Jon had seen him, he suspected his brother may have started dealing. ‘Long hair?’

‘No. Shaved very short. Dark brown.’

The crack in the egg had widened, releasing a white strand that flicked around like a tendril of some aquatic plant untouched by any sun. He turned the gas ring off and the water suddenly became calm. As the eggs settled onto the base of the pan he heard the clicks through the water. ‘How tall?’

‘That’s hard to say.’

‘Sorry?’

‘We can’t ... we can’t quite tell at this stage. We’re waiting for the pathologist—’

Jon cut in. ‘Superintendent, just take a guess.’

That cough again. ‘I think it would be better if you came out here.’

Jon turned his back to the room. ‘Will you stop pissing me about here?’ he hissed. ‘How tall is the man you’ve found?’

‘We can’t tell. I’m sorry to say this, but the body has been dismembered.’

He felt a tug on his bathrobe belt and looked down to see Holly peeping round the curve of his leg. She looked frightened. Jon forced himself to smile and, in an absurdly casual voice said, ‘OK, I’ll be on my way.’