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The Radleys

Written by Matt Haig

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THE RADLEYS

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1

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For Andrea, as always.

And for Lucas and Pearl. Don't spill a drop.

FRIDAY

Your instincts are wrong. Animals rely on instincts for their daily survival, but we are not beasts. We are not lions or sharks or vultures. We are civilised and civilisation only works if instincts are suppressed. So, do your bit for society and ignore those dark desires inside you.

The Abstainer's Handbook (second edition), p.54

17 Orchard Lane

It is a quiet place, especially at night.

Too quiet, you'd be entitled to think, for any kind of monster to live among its pretty, tree-shaded lanes.

Indeed, at three o'clock in the morning in the village of Bishopthorpe, it is easy to believe the lie indulged in by its residents – that it is a place for good and quiet people to live good and quiet lives.

At this hour, the only sounds to be heard are those made by nature itself. The hoot of an owl, the faraway bark of a dog or, on a breezy night like this one, the wind's obscure whisper through the sycamore trees. Even if you stood on the main street, right outside the fancy-dress shop or the pub or the Hungry Gannet delicatessen, you wouldn't often hear any traffic, or be able to see the abusive graffiti that decorates the former post office (though the word **FREAK** might just be legible if you strain your eyes).

Away from the main street, on somewhere like Orchard Lane, if you took a nocturnal stroll past the detached period homes lived in by solicitors and doctors and project managers, you would find all their lights off and curtains drawn, secluding them from the night. Or you would until you reached number 17, where you'd notice the glow from an upstairs window filtering through the curtains.

And if you stopped, sucked in that cool and consoling fresh night air, you would at first see that number 17 is a house otherwise in tune with those around it. Maybe not quite as grand as its closest neighbour, number 19, with its wide driveway and elegant Regency features, but still one that holds its own.

It is a house that looks and feels precisely how a village family home should look – not too big, but big enough, with nothing out of place or jarring on the eye. A dream house in many ways, as estate agents would tell you, and certainly perfect to raise children.

But after a moment you'd notice there is something not right about it. No, maybe 'notice' is too strong. Perhaps you wouldn't actively realise that even nature seems to be quieter around this house, that you can't hear any birds or anything else at all. Yet there might be an instinctive sense that would make you wonder about that glowing light, and feel a coldness that doesn't come from the night air.

If that feeling grew, it might become a fear that would make you want to leave the scene and run away, but you probably wouldn't. You would observe the nice house and the people carrier parked outside and think that this is the property of perfectly normal human beings who pose no threat to the outside world.

If you let yourself think this, you would be wrong. For 17 Orchard Lane is the home of the Radleys and, despite their very best efforts, they are anything but normal.

The Spare Bedroom

'You need sleep,' he tells himself, but it is no good.

The light on at three o'clock this Friday morning belongs to him, Rowan, the elder of the two Radley children. He is wide awake, despite having drunk six times the recommended dose of Night Nurse.

He is always awake at this time. If he is lucky, on a good night, he will drop off to sleep at around four to wake again at six or shortly after. Two hours of tormented, restless sleep, dreaming violent nightmares he can't understand. But tonight it's not a good night, with his rash playing up and that breeze blowing against the window, and he knows he will probably be going to school on no rest whatsoever.

He puts down his book: Byron's *Collected Poems*. He hears someone walking along the landing, not to the toilet but to the spare room.

The door to the airing cupboard opens. There is a slight rummaging around, and a few moments of quiet before she can be heard leaving the room. Again, this isn't entirely unusual. Often he has heard his mother get up in the middle of the night to head to the spare bedroom with some secret purpose he has never enquired about.

Then he hears her go back to bed and the indistinct mumble of his parents' voices through the wall.

Dreaming

Helen gets back into bed, her whole body tense with secrets. Her husband sighs a strange, yearning kind of sigh and nuzzles into her.

‘What on earth are you doing?’

‘I’m trying to kiss you,’ he says.

‘Please, Peter,’ she says, a headache pressing behind her eyes. ‘It’s the middle of the night.’

‘As opposed to all those other times, when you would want to be kissed by your husband.’

‘I thought you were asleep.’

‘I was. I was dreaming. It was quite an exciting one. Nostalgic, really.’

‘Peter, we’ll wake the children,’ she says, although she knows Rowan still has his light on.

‘Come on, I just want to kiss you. It was such a good dream.’

‘No. You don’t. You want more. You want—’

‘So, what are you worried about? The sheets?’

‘I just want to go to sleep.’

‘What were you doing?’

‘I needed the toilet.’ She is so used to this lie she doesn’t think about it.

‘That bladder. It’s getting weaker.’

‘Good night.’

‘Do you remember that librarian we took home?’

She can hear the smile in his question. ‘Jesus, Peter. That was London. We don’t talk about London.’

‘But when you think about nights like that, doesn’t it make you—’

‘No. It was a lifetime ago. I don’t think about it at all.’

A Sudden Tweak of Pain

In the morning, shortly after waking, Helen sits up and sips her water. She unscrews the jar of ibuprofen tablets and places one on her tongue, as delicately as a communion wafer.

She swallows, and right at that moment as the pill washes down her throat, her husband – only a few steps away in the bathroom – feels a sudden tweak of pain.

He has cut himself shaving.

He watches the blood glistening on his damp, oiled skin.

Beautiful. Deep red. He dabs it, studies the smear it has made on his finger and his heart quickens. The finger moves closer and closer to his mouth, but before it gets there he hears something. Rapid footsteps rushing towards the bathroom, then an attempt at opening the door.

‘Dad, please could you let me in . . . please,’ says his daughter, Clara, as she bangs hard against the thick wood.

He does as she asks, and Clara rushes in and leans over the toilet bowl.

‘Clara,’ he says, as she throws up. ‘Clara, what’s wrong?’

She leans back. Her pale face looks up at him, from above her school uniform, her eyes desperate through her glasses.

‘Oh God,’ she says, and turns back towards the bowl. She is sick again. Peter smells it and catches sight of it too. He flinches, not from the vomit but from what he knows it means.

Within a few seconds, everyone is there. Helen is crouching down next to their daughter, stroking her back and telling her everything is all right. And their son Rowan is in the doorway, with his Factor 60 sunblock still needing to be rubbed in.

‘What’s happening to her?’ he asks.

‘It’s fine,’ says Clara, not wanting an audience. ‘Honestly, I’m okay now. I feel fine.’

And the word stays in the room, hovering around and changing the air with its own sick-scented falseness.

The Act

Clara does her best to keep up the act all morning, getting herself prepared for school just like normal, despite the rotten feeling in her stomach.

You see, last Saturday Clara upped her game from vegetarian to full-time, committed vegan in an attempt to get animals to like her a bit more.

Like the ducks who wouldn't take her bread, the cats who didn't want to be stroked, the horses in the fields by Thirsk Road who went crazy every time she walked past. She couldn't shake that school visit to Flamingo Land where every flamingo panicked and fled before she reached the lake. Or her short-lived goldfish, Rhett and Scarlett – the only pets she had ever been allowed. The total horror that first morning when she found them floating upside down on the water's surface, with the colour drained from their scales.

Right now, she feels her mother's eyes on her as she pulls the soya milk out of the fridge.

'You know, if you switched to proper milk you'd feel a lot better. Even skimmed.'

Clara wonders how the process of skimming milk actually makes it more vegan, but she does her best to smile. 'I'm fine. Please, don't worry.'

They are all there now, in the kitchen – her father drinking his fresh coffee, and her brother devouring his morning smörgåsbord of deli meats.

'Peter, tell her. She's making herself ill.'

Peter takes a moment. His wife's words have to swim through the

wide red river of his thoughts and heave themselves out, dripping and weary, onto the narrow bank of fatherly duty.

‘Your mother’s right,’ he says. ‘You’re making yourself ill.’

Clara pours the offending milk onto her Nuts and Seeds muesli, feeling queasier by the second. She wants to ask for the radio to be turned down, but knows if she does she will only make herself appear more ill.

At least Rowan is on her side, in his weary way. ‘It’s soya, Mum,’ he says, with his mouth full. ‘Not heroin.’

‘But she needs to eat meat.’

‘I’m *okay*.’

‘Look,’ says Helen, ‘I really think you should take the day off school. I’ll phone them for you if you want.’

Clara shakes her head. She’d promised Eve she would be going to Jamie Southern’s party tonight and so she’ll need to go to school to stand a chance of being allowed out. Besides, a whole day of listening to pro-meat propaganda isn’t going to help her. ‘Honestly, I’m feeling a lot better. I’m not going to be sick again.’

Her mum and dad do their usual thing of swapping coded eye-messages Clara can’t translate.

Peter shrugs. (‘The thing about Dad is,’ Rowan had once said, ‘he couldn’t really give a shit about pretty much anything.’)

Helen is as defeated as when she placed the soya milk in the trolley a few nights ago, under Clara’s threat of becoming anorexic.

‘Okay, you can go to school,’ her mum says, eventually. ‘Just please, *be careful*.’

Forty-six

You reach a certain age – sometimes it's fifteen, sometimes it's forty-six – and you realise the cliché you have adopted for yourself isn't working. That is what is happening to Peter Radley right now, chewing away at a piece of buttered multi-grain toast and staring at the crinkled transparent plastic which contains the remainder of the loaf.

The rational law-abiding adult with his wife and his car and his kids and his direct debits to WaterAid.

He had only wanted sex, last night. Just harmless, human sex. And what was sex? It was nothing. It was just a hug in motion. A bloodless piece of body friction. Okay, so he might have wanted it to lead somewhere else, but he could have contained himself. He *has* contained himself for seventeen years.

Well, fuck it, he thinks.

It feels good, swearing, even in his thoughts. He had read in the *BMJ* that there was new evidence to suggest the act of swearing relieves pain.

'Fuck it,' he mumbles, too quiet for Helen to hear. 'Fuck. It.'

Realism

‘I’m worried about Clara,’ Helen says, handing Peter his lunchbox. ‘She’s only been vegan a week and she’s clearly getting ill. What if it triggers something?’

He has hardly heard her. He is just staring downwards, contemplating the dark chaos inside his briefcase. ‘There’s so much flaming crap in here.’

‘Peter, I’m worried about Clara.’

Peter puts two pens in the bin. ‘*I*m worried about her. I’m very worried about her. But it’s not like I’m allowed to offer a solution, is it?’

Helen shakes her head. ‘Not this, Peter. Not now. This is serious. I just wish we could try and be adult about this. I want to know what you think we should do.’

He sighs. ‘I think we should tell her the truth.’

‘What?’

He takes a deep breath of the stifling kitchen air. ‘I think it is the right time to tell the children.’

‘Peter, we have to keep them safe. We have to keep everything safe. I want you to be realistic.’

He buckles up his briefcase. ‘Ah, realism. Not really us, is it?’

The calendar catches his eye. The Degas ballerina and the dates crowded with Helen’s handwriting. The reminders for book group meetings, theatre trips, badminton sessions, art classes. The never-ending supply of Things to Do. Including today: *Felts – dinner here – 7.30 – Lorna doing starter.*

Peter pictures his pretty neighbour sitting opposite him.

‘Look, I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘I’m just feeling tetchy. Low iron. I just sometimes get fed up of all these lies, you know?’

Helen nods. She knows.

Noting the time, Peter heads down the hallway.

‘It’s bin day,’ she says. ‘And the recycling needs taking out.’

Recycling. Peter sighs, and picks up the box full of jars and bottles.
Empty vessels waiting to be born again.

‘I’m just worried the longer she goes without eating the stuff she should be eating, the more likely it is she’ll crave—’

‘I know, I know. We’ll work something out. But I’ve really got to go – I’m late as it is.’

He opens the door and they see the ominous blue sky, gleaming its bright warning. ‘Are we nearly out of ibuprofen?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘I’ll stop at the chemist on my way back. My head’s bloody terrible.’

‘Yeah, mine too.’

He kisses her cheek and strokes her arm with a fleeting tenderness, a microscopic reminder of how they used to be, and then he is gone.