Chapter 1

Erin woke with a weight on her body. She could feel it on her legs and across her chest, solid and heavy. It was still dark in her bedroom, or perhaps it seemed that way because she did not know if her eyelids were open. But then she found she could not move them. She could not move at all; she worked down from her head to her toes, testing the muscles and finding them all unresponsive.

And as she scanned herself, she became aware that the mass pressing down on her had a shape. It was heavier in some places, but more sharp and distinct in others. It felt as though it centred on her legs in particular, as though she was lying under damp sand. She thought her eyelids must have been open, then, because the shape seemed to have an outline, a sense of a deeper darkness. It absorbed all the shadows in the room. She could not move her eyes to look at anything else.

It shifted. Something hard like bone dug into her stomach as though to squeeze her like a stuffed animal. The mattress creaked.

She realised then, as the pressure on her stomach split in two, that she could feel hands palpating her flesh as a cat paws at its bedding. But she was too afraid to stop them. She was too afraid to move. She felt betrayed by her own body, frozen in place and vulnerable.

The hands shifted upwards as something else, a knee, nestled between her shins and pulled the duvet tight over her legs. She heard the slow hiss of fabric as the figure moved.

She was dreaming; she had to be. Had she not checked a dozen times that all the doors and windows were firmly locked? Could someone have got in regardless? Had she slept through the smash of glass or the thud of the broken door latch? She
had not even heard the intruder slither up to her bedside. She had only woken up now, while it pinned her firmly to the mattress, too late to save herself.

Her heart was like a feral animal slamming against her chest, determined to get away even if the rest of her could not. And the deeper she fell into that frenzy, the slower, calmer, more deliberate the figure seemed to move above her.

Something came close to her face. A chin, a nose. Rough dry lips on the line of her jaw, carefully pecking along her skin towards her ear. Breath rustled in her hair. Although she could not see its features, she knew the intruder was smiling. She could sense its enjoyment.

The hands moved again; she could just make out their shape – like spider legs curling in the darkness. Cold fingertips brushed the hair away from her temples, and a deep, sickening wave of fear gripped her. The fingers lingered, agonisingly meticulous, smoothing the softer hair around her ears. She had, in the back of her mind, assumed that the intruder was male. But the fingers seemed too thin, each touch was too delicate, and now she was not sure.

She thought her heart was going to burst. The intruder seemed less interested in her fear, now. It was preoccupied by the rhythmic stroking of her hair. This was somehow worse than when the hands crushed against her stomach. It was worse than the feeling of the knee at the top of her thighs. Its obsessive focus on her hair made her feel like an object, like a doll lying helpless and mute.

Her thoughts were now just flashes of white. Her muscles strained desperately to move and she felt as though she was paring away from herself.

And then, like horses released at the start of a race, her body snapped up. The hands disappeared from her hair; the weight was suddenly gone. Erin tumbled out of bed and ran, half-crouching, tripping over her own feet, to the bathroom. She fell
heavily to her knees in front of the toilet and heaved. Sweat prickled and chilled her back. Her stomach was tight, and she gripped it, but that only reminded her of the sensation of those heavy hands and she heaved again, this time bringing up bile that burnt her throat. There was an urgency unlike when she was ill, a sense of escape, as though some inner part of her was trying to get out of the body that had been so useless a few minutes before. She coughed, wiped her eyes, and sat back. She listened to her own fevered breathing for a few moments as she calmed down.

In her sudden panic, she had not checked for the intruder. She looked back towards the door. It had not followed her in; the house was quiet. Was it sitting patiently on her bed, waiting for her to come back? She stayed still, listening for any sound, watching for any sign that there was someone still with her.

She swallowed, and took a deep breath. ‘Who’s there?’

Her voice hung in the quiet bathroom. Somehow, it made her feel braver. She asked again, more loudly this time, feeling the vibration of the words in her throat.

She got to her feet, realising how light and weak her legs felt, and went to the cabinet on the wall. She opened the door and pulled out a sharp pair of nail scissors. They were thin and small in her hand; she hid as much of the handle as she could so that only the curved beak of the blade poked out between her thumb and finger. She edged forwards across the landing, peering through the dark doorway, revealing the inside of her bedroom inch by inch.

The room was empty. Of course it was. But still she gripped the scissors in her hand. She could not quite accept that the intruder had not been real; she felt as though she was still in a strange in-between place, she was awake but suspicious of everything around her.
She turned the light on, making an effort to feel the snap of the switch as she pressed it down. As though viewing a gallery display, she looked at everything carefully. She looked at the way the mattress cover wrinkled like a fingerprint, and how the screen of her phone reflected an image of the glass of water next to it. There was no one else there, and no evidence that there had been an intruder at all. But she could still feel it in the air and on her skin.

Her stomach was tender. She rubbed it gently and wondered if the sensation of those strange hands had actually been pain – a warning to wake up that had somehow gone wrong. A new wave of nausea made her hurry back to the bathroom, but she gritted her teeth and held it back. It passed off. Was it something she had eaten? Was she ill? She had felt fine before she went to bed. It did not seem right.

Sitting on the bathroom floor, she found that she had a lingering sensation of pressure on her chest. In the same way that her ears would ring softly after being in a loud place, this was an echo of the weight she had felt in bed. But that suggested it was real. And it had not been real, had it?

Her eyelids were getting heavy, and she rubbed them, desperate to stay awake.

She was starting to get cold in the bathroom. Groaning, she got to her feet. She brushed her teeth and splashed warm water over her face. She gripped the hard edge of the sink for a moment. Again, she found she could not move. But now she did not want to move; she did not want to fall asleep and have to go through it all a second time. She would rather die than feel that weight on top of her again.

She went back to her room. As before, she stood in the doorway and looked around for anything unfamiliar. Nothing had changed. She tapped her fingers on the light switch, and decided to leave it on. She got back into bed but did not lie down. Her pillows were thick and soft against her back and she sat propped up. She brought
her legs in and crossed them. Just for tonight, she thought; one night’s lack of sleep would not hurt.

Two weeks later, Erin’s sleeplessness had become a problem. She could not remember the last time she woke up feeling rested. Not since she had seen and felt the intruder on her bed. At first, she had been too scared to sleep. But then she found she could not sleep even when she thought she had recovered from the frightening experience.

She was lying in bed again, staring at the ceiling. She had spent another evening looking online for articles and forums discussing sleep paralysis. She did not think she was going mad, and the things she read confirmed that, but the hallucination had felt real. It had unsettled her.

She knew what had caused it; she had seen something at work, in the public library, a few days before her first attack. There was a little girl asleep in the corner of the children’s section, and there was an old man watching her. It was hard to think about, to remember him standing there, but the image kept flashing in her mind no matter how hard she tried to push it away.

Erin closed her eyes and focused on the amber dots swimming in her vision but then she focused too hard and forgot to breathe properly. She gasped as though she was drowning in her bed. She felt guilty; she did not know how long the man had been in the children’s room of the library, and she wished she had checked in there sooner. Then there was the teacher. The girl was clearly upset when she woke up and Miss Parry had only made her feel worse.
Erin checked the time. She had gone to bed at ten, and it was now just after midnight. The alarm would go off at seven. Her body ached for sleep, but her mind was too agitated and would not calm down.

Again, she was thrown into the memory. The girl had a book open on her lap. The rest of her class had gone upstairs and they had left her, had somehow forgotten all about her, and because she was asleep she had not heard them leave. The children’s section was adjacent to the entrance, in its own separate room. The door was always left open – it was covered in handwritten book reports and messy paintings of fictional characters, and the paper rustled like moths whenever the main entrance was opened.

Erin was at the front desk computer printing out posters for a Halloween event when she saw the children file out of the room to join with their teacher on the stairs. She reminded herself to check the state of the room, but she thought it could wait until she had finished. She sent the poster to be printed and left the desk to retrieve the copies from the office.

When she came back, she put the posters on the desk ready to hand to Miss Parry when the class was about to leave. But she took the top sheet and went over the notice board by the entrance.

As she walked past the children’s room, she glimpsed something that should not have been there. Something big that filled the space. Erin’s heart lurched and she hurried through the door.

A man, the one with the messy white hair who came in every day, was standing in the middle of the room.

He was not alone. Beyond him, on the low blue sofa that ran the length of the wall, was a little girl. She was slouched forwards, asleep. Her hair covered her face;
her fringe dangled down like a curtain. Erin did not remember her from the group, but she was wearing the bright red uniform cardigan. She looked like a normal child, but there was something peculiar about the way she slept. She made sleeping look like it was the only thing she ever did. When Erin saw her, she could not imagine the child doing anything but sleep.

The man was watching the girl. Erin was behind him, and he had not heard her come in. She came close enough to see his face. He did not move, but his eyes were wide and flitting back and forth over the girl in front of him. He held a thriller in his hand, and he gripped it tightly, tapping his index finger on the cover.

‘You shouldn’t be in here,’ Erin said, but her voice sounded far away.

The man flinched and turned to face her. Now his eyes were darting over her, and she felt as though she was shrinking. He smelled of synthetic oranges. Erin could see the way the stubble on his cheeks poked out from little craters on his skin. She wanted to be far away from him.

‘I was just –’

‘Get out,’ she said.

He frowned, hurt, and lifted his arm to point at the girl. ‘I was just going to wake her up.’

‘Stop it!’ she said. She swallowed hard, heat blooming across her face.

At the noise, the girl lifted her head. She blinked slowly, looking at Erin, and then at the old, red-faced man. And when she had taken him in, she seemed to curl in on herself like burning paper.

The man’s bottom lip started to tremble. He took one last look at them both, and then he left the room.
Erin was still looking at the doorway when she heard a tangle of voices above her. A sharper set of footsteps mingled with the soft patter of the class. They had noticed that the girl was missing and were beginning to worry. A moment later, Miss Parry’s heels rapped on the wooden stairs as she descended. At the bottom, she looked straight at Erin.

‘Is Hannah in there?’ she asked, walking towards the door. ‘Small; brown hair?’

‘Yes,’ said Erin.

She turned to the girl. Their eyes met and Erin saw that she was terrified of her teacher.

Miss Parry came in and dropped her weight against the doorframe in a theatrical display of relief. Hannah started to say something. Something about the man. She looked at Erin as though for help, and then she started to cry.

‘Now, now,’ Miss Parry said, coming close and crouching until her head was level with Hannah’s. ‘No need to cry. But you know you were supposed to come upstairs.’

‘She was asleep,’ Erin said.

They both looked up at her. She knew she should not have said it. She should not have said anything. Hannah rubbed her eyes and cried louder.

‘I see,’ said Miss Parry, frowning. She stood up and put her hands on her hips. It made Erin wince to remember it; her heart lurched and she was looking at the ceiling again. She grazed her fingers over the bedside table, feeling for the cold glass screen of her phone. It lit up at her touch: one o’clock in the morning.

She should have said something about the man, she thought. She was angry at herself for letting that woman take over the situation. Erin rolled over onto her side.
and pressed her face into the pillow. The girl was so scared, and she had needed Erin’s help to explain what had happened. To get Miss Parry to do something. But instead she had landed the little girl in trouble and the moment was over before she could say anything more. Those were the sorts of moments a child tends to remember.

Erin should have stood up for the girl, and for herself. She should not have allowed herself to be turned into another disapproving adult.

Erin’s Mum, now retired, had been a teacher, too. She had been the headmistress of the local primary school. Like Miss Parry, Mum had always worn severe-looking dresses usually worn by city business types; and they both seemed as though they had accidentally, reluctantly stumbled into taking care of a group of six year-olds. Even though she was around the same age as Miss Parry, Erin found herself feeling nervous and small around her. She could not understand how someone still young and new to the job could be so impatient with children.

Under her plastic-looking fringe, Miss Parry had peered up at Erin. Her dress had been tight over her thighs as she crouched. Hannah must find the library terribly boring, Miss Parry had said, if she can sleep when the rest of her class is busy. She had asked if Erin agreed. Hannah’s eyes had darted between her and Miss Parry. Erin had not responded, but she could see that Hannah had lost faith in her. Miss Parry led Hannah, who was scrunching the sleeves of her cardigan into her streaming eyes, upstairs to join the rest of the class.

Erin stretched. She needed to sleep; she could not carry on going to work every day without resting properly. If the nightmare happened again, if she saw something in her bedroom, perhaps she would not be as afraid. Perhaps she would know it was not real, that she was somehow dreaming while awake.

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She turned over and tried to settle down. A few minutes later, she realised that something still was not right. It felt as though she was in the wrong place; that she had got herself lost on the way to sleep. She knew she was sleepy, but her eyes did not feel heavy at all. She wanted to sleep – she should be asleep – but her body was too alert. She got up and shuffled down to the kitchen for a glass of water, hoping such a small action would set her back on the right track.

Her alarm rang at seven but, for a moment, she did not understand where the noise was coming from. When she realised the source of the beeping, it felt like a personal attack. Grudgingly, she jabbed a code into the screen of her phone and turned it off. She remembered dreaming about trees, so she must have slept without another incident, but it could not have been for more than four hours. Perhaps, if she just closed her eyes again, she could carry on sleeping. She remembered what it felt like; the bare skin of her legs almost melding into the sheets. Everything was soft and warm. Each slow breath came from somewhere deeper within her, the place where sleep lived. She had just forgotten how to get there – she kept getting misdirected.

She walked to the children’s section as soon as she got into work. She stood by the door and looked over to the chairs where the girl had been sleeping. The book the girl had been reading was on an individual display stand. Erin had put it there to try to encourage Hannah to read it again, but she had not seen the girl since and the book had not been touched. She picked up the book and flicked through its pages. It was nothing but photographs of whales. There was not much to it besides the pictures in various shades of blue – no passages of facts or grisly images of hunting habits. It was a very calming book. And the children’s section always had a soothing quietness.
which seemed deeper for the display of settled disorder around the room. She could see why the girl had fallen asleep.

There was a noise behind her. She turned, and through the door she saw an elderly woman zipping her coat in preparation to leave. She slowly brought her hands to pull up her hood, looking at Erin as she did it. The woman nodded, and walked out into the rain. The paper on the door shivered. Erin did not move, and a few seconds later a younger woman walked in, turning to look through the door as she walked past. She did not really see Erin – but she seemed to peer into the room as though by force of habit. Erin put Hannah’s book face-up on the seat where she had found it, and left the room.

‘Have you noticed that everyone looks through that door?’ Erin said to Nicholas, her boss, who was busy sharpening pencils at the desk.

He looked up, blinking drowsily like an old cat. ‘What’s that, now?’

‘The door to the children’s section.’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘when we had the extension, we gave them a separate room to keep the noise in, but we keep the door open so we can see what they’re doing.’

‘But everyone looks through it. When they leave and when they come in. So why is it no one saw…’

‘Saw what?’

She found she could not bring herself to say anything about the man. It was as though her words had suddenly run out of space to move forwards. ‘It’s a bit cut off.’

Nicholas tangled his fingers in the white curls on his head. He did that whenever Erin confused him – stalling for time while he came up with an acceptable response. She never meant to baffle him; sometimes they just seemed to miss each other’s meaning.
‘It’s a very colourful room,’ he said.

They heard the judder of the automatic doors. A man walked through, head already turned in the direction of the door. He passed the front desk; Erin and Nicholas wished him a good morning, but he continued to walk in silence until he became hidden by the shelves.

‘Do you see what I mean? The door attracts attention, but if there was someone behind it then you wouldn’t be able to see them.’

Nicholas’s bottom lip trembled. His fingertips coiled his hair into tight ringlets. ‘See someone? The children’s section has been like that for years, Erin. Where else could we put it? There’s no space now we’ve got computers, and we can’t very well tuck those away in a separate room. Besides, if there’s a fire, the children can get out first. It’s a safety thing, you see. Yes, a safety thing.’

‘I just think it’s a bit…you know there was a little girl asleep in there on her own the other week?’ She gritted her teeth. ‘There was someone – a man – watching her.’

Nicholas chuckled. ‘Children will sleep anywhere and through anything. They’re funny like that.’

That was not the point. He had completely missed the point. Now Erin was the one struggling to respond; he had managed to throw her off. She did not usually get angry with him when their conversations become muddled, but today she found that her shoulders were stiff with tension. She knew this was not like her – she was just tired.

Her headache worsened after lunch. With each footstep, the pain thrummed in a hundred different places along her skull. Another group from the local school arrived – the next year up from Hannah’s class. Their teacher, a large man Erin only
knew as Jim, read from the stack of newspapers by the entrance all afternoon. He could see into the children’s section, but he left the children to go wherever they wanted. It was not that the children acted up, but it did take a while to round them all up again at three o’clock. The little girl, Hannah, would have had an easier time sleeping in Jim’s class. Erin thought even he would have had a nap if he had the chance. But the library was probably ruined for Hannah, now. She started to feel guilty again.

A boy tugged on the back of her shirt. Her mind was elsewhere, and she did not know how long she had been standing there, facing a shelf with an armful of books, not moving. He snapped her out of it, and she looked down. He immediately started explaining a new interest he wanted to look into – some overcomplicated bit of physics he did not really understand, but she encouraged him anyway and led him over to the popular science section. While he talked to her she realised that her disrupted sleep had affected her more than she expected. She barely heard what he was saying. She could not remember how she responded. All she could think about was how wonderful she felt before she got out of bed that morning, and how she should have taken a sick day to hold onto that sensation. She wanted to get back into bed. More than anything else, she wanted to get back into bed.

‘I thought you might know,’ he said.

Erin had no idea what he was talking about. Something to do with Newton’s laws of motion, she thought. Her head hurt too much to think about it, and even though he looked keen to explain it to her, she did not think she could humour him. But she smiled as though she knew exactly what he was after, and she handed him an outdated A-Level Physics textbook from a shelf he could not reach. He flicked through the pages and seemed pleased with how little he could comprehend. Then he
wandered off, puzzling over the text and almost walking into a shelf. It was a nice little school, and all of the people who worked in the library enjoyed having the classes visit in an afternoon, but today Erin just wanted to go home.

As she watched the boy disappear behind a corner, Erin was aware of a presence behind her. The back of her neck tingled. She turned around, and saw the old man who smelled of oranges standing a few feet away from her. He was watching something, but Erin had turned quickly enough to catch him move his head down. He had been looking at her. The man coughed – a loud, wet sound – and looked up in a deliberately casual manner. He seemed to be testing her, daring her to shout at him again like she had in the children’s section. When she did not say anything, he looked up. His eyes were glistening, and he winked as he held up the paperback he was carrying.

Erin’s stomach bubbled. She tried to be professional, to smile or nod at him, but her head seemed to be trapped in a vice. Instead, she rushed past him and into the staff room.

She stood by the sink for a moment, feeling cold sweat prickle on her neck. Tired. She was so tired. She kneaded her cheeks with her fingers, pulling them down until she felt like a bloodhound.

‘Ooh, are you making one?’ asked Nicholas.

Erin hit her elbow on the side of the counter. Painful vibrations travelled up her arm. She cried out.

Nicholas laughed. ‘Nothing worse than whacking your funny bone.’


‘Tea?’
Erin’s insides, still frothy from her encounter with the man, seemed to heave upwards. But the feeling was sharp, not nauseous. It was a thousand curses clawing their way up her throat. She pretended to wince with another wave of pain in order not to open her mouth.

She tried to focus on filling kettle. Such a mundane task could calm her down, if she channelled all her attention to the feeling of the tap against her palm and the sound of the water against metal.

But Nicholas had started humming a confusing medley of Christmas carols. They were only a few days into November. Was he doing it deliberately to annoy her?

Erin’s breathing became shorter. Other sounds seemed to become muffled around Nicholas’s cheerful singing. The kettle roared from far away. She clinked the mugs together deliberately as she brought them down, but nothing would block the notes of the song.

She opened the cutlery drawer. ‘Why are there never any bastard tea spoons?’ she yelled, and slammed the drawer so hard that the contents rattled.

The room was quiet.

‘You just need to wash one,’ Nicholas said. His voice was like cotton wool.

‘I’m too tired to wash one. Why has no one else washed them? Why can’t…’

Her eyes prickled. Was she really going to cry? Over tea spoons?

She took a deep breath, and patted the cutlery drawer as if in apology. ‘I didn’t mean to shout. I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s…I’ve got a headache today. I just need a good sleep.’

‘No harm done,’ said Nicholas, but the corners of his mouth were tight.
She could barely keep her eyes open that evening. She had been thinking about going to bed earlier than usual to catch up on the sleep she had lost the previous night, but it was only just after seven o’clock. Far too early, she thought. It was always warm in her little terraced house and she felt she could fall asleep right there on the sofa. She could feel herself slipping, but she knew she would be sore in the morning if it got cold later on. She thought about finding a blanket, but decided against it. If she was getting up, she might as well go to bed. She did not want to start any problematic sleeping habits just because of a few bad nights.

Erin forced herself up and away from the living room, distracting herself with small jobs until it got close enough to eight o’clock. Then the pull towards her bedroom became too strong for her to wait any longer, and she turned off the lights and headed upstairs. She had never been so excited to get into bed. She grabbed a fistful of duvet and rolled onto her side, tucking the covers under her stomach. There was still some tension in her body, particularly along her shoulders, and she was shivering a little from the coolness of the fabric, but the bed soon warmed up. Erin was relaxed and happy, and she thought about the deep well from which she had drawn each breath when she woke up that morning. She had been waiting for this all day, now she could finally sleep.

Her body jerked like she had been snapped in two. She was struggling to breathe. She trembled, startled by the violence of her own muscles. She rolled over to face the glowing clock on the bedside table. It was half past nine. Cars were still driving up and down the street outside, sending rectangles of yellow light across the ceiling. Erin lay on her back, but she realised her shirt was damp and cold with sweat and she sat
up. She did not think she had been dreaming, so it could not have been a nightmare that woke her.

A beam in the attic let out a sharp crack. Erin looked up at the ceiling, and a similar noise came from over in the spare bedroom. She wondered if a particularly loud snap had woken her so suddenly. Perhaps it sounded dangerous to her unconscious brain, and it had shaken her out of sleep.

She settled down again, shifting back onto her right side. She breathed out, puffing her cheeks in an exaggerated gesture of relaxation. She was calm again.

But something did not feel right. Every time she inhaled, the skin of her stomach brushed against her shirt. It did not make full contact – it only got close enough to touch the soft hairs – but the more she focused on it, the more irritating it became. She was too conscious of her breathing, then, and her heart started to beat faster with the inconsistent supply of air. Her left hand was still clutching her duvet, but with her free hand she wrenched the old shirt and tucked it tightly under her. It did not make any difference, however, because she was still aware of the sensation of her skin touching the fabric with each breath. Sitting up, she pulled the shirt over her head and threw it across the room. It glided through the air for a moment before crumpling on the floor without making a sound. She would be too cold, now, she thought. Maybe this was why people wore pyjamas instead of old oversized T-shirts.

She felt better when she got back under the covers. Under the duvet cocoon, her stomach expanded and detracted without touching anything. She could relax at last.

A man was standing three feet away from Erin’s bed, perfectly still, watching her. It was the old man from the library.
She reached out to her bedside table, scrambling for the lamp switch and knocking her phone to the floor. She tried to stay calm but the way he looked at her made her chest painfully tight. She found the switch; the room woke up with a soft glow. The man was gone. Erin pushed her hair away from her face and gathered it away from her neck, feeling the night air cool the sweat on her skin.

Now, with her knees pressed up against her chest and her breath coming laboured and quick, she could not bear the thought of being unconscious again.

Erin could still see him when she closed her eyes, so she kept them open. She blinked furiously whenever she felt herself drifting off. Her body ached for sleep.

The image of the man seemed to be projected onto her ceiling, blending into the grain of the dark. She could not stop thinking about him. She rolled onto her side; she was immediately uncomfortable. She curled up, tucking her knees up into her chest, and stuck one leg out from under the duvet until it was half-numb with cold. She just had to find her usual position and concentrate on thinking about nothing. If she did that, she thought, she would still get seven hours of sleep. Seven was better than five. Plus she had had an hour before she jerked awake. Eight hours, then. She had read about getting eight hours; that was what the doctors recommended. That was a recommended amount of sleep to have.

It was quiet outside, now. The house was still creaking but not as frequently as when she first went to bed. She remembered how she had fallen asleep the previous night after getting up and going downstairs to get water. Changing her thought pattern and moving around for a few minutes had seemed to work. She could not afford to waste any more time.
She got up, forgetting for a moment that she was no longer wearing her shirt. She picked up a cardigan lying at the top of her laundry basket and put it on, shivering as she walked down to the kitchen and then back into bed.

For a while, she thought it was going to work. Then she realised she did not even have her eyes closed and she rammed them shut. She told herself that she was doing it wrong, that she needed to go back to school and learn how to sleep again. She began to see patterns of gold and green and black. She watched them move. The patterns morphed together and split apart again. Things appeared and vanished. She could make out shapes, features, and then faces. Faces of people she knew and people she did not know flashed in and out of vision. She saw Hannah, slouching on the sofa in the library. She saw the man. Then Erin was in Hannah’s position; she was swallowed into the fabric and the blue of the sofa spread outwards, splashing over the carpet. She was lying on a bed of water, watching a whale’s tail growing bigger and bigger. The tail, like two immense hands joined at the wrist, lifted up and then started to drop. It slammed down on her.

Erin scrabbled to sit upright, overwhelmed by an urge to be sick. She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth, swallowing hard. Her heart was pounding and her limbs were weak. The nausea subsided enough for her to sip from the glass of water on the table by her bed. She shoved the duvet away and most of it slid onto the floor.

Twice in one night. Her body would not let her sleep; it was as though it needed her to be awake. Was there some part of her that thought she was not safe in her bed? She gathered her duvet again, and lay under it, holding it as tightly as she could.

A feeling of insecurity started to bloom in her stomach. Had she forgotten to lock the door? Of course not, she thought. She locked it behind her as soon as she got
in. Although she did not remember doing it today. Rather, she did, but the memory was always the same so the image of her at the door could have been from yesterday or the day before. It was not an activity that stood out. She did it absent-mindedly, like she usually brushed her teeth absent-mindedly. But she could not remember standing in the bathroom, either.

She rolled onto her back and opened her eyes. She felt sleep leave her behind like a speeding train. She sighed loudly, as though she wanted someone to hear her. She lay there for a few minutes, and then she stood up and shuffled downstairs in the dark. The front door handle did not budge when she tried it. Erin rattled it for a few seconds, embedding the sensation in her mind until she felt satisfied. Then she wandered slowly around her kitchen, making sure everything was switched off. She double-checked the oven, even though she had not used it that day. At the back of her mind, she knew she was being ridiculous, but she could not shake the image of flames licking at her bed. Everything needed to be perfect. No distractions. Finally done, she went back upstairs. She paused at her bedroom window, parted the curtains and looked out onto the street below.

There was a light on in the opposite house. A bedroom light.

She hurried to the bedside table for her phone. She looked at the time; it was just after one in the morning. Back at the window, she looked out across the street. In the opposite house, a bedroom window was glowing a soft orange and the curtains were open. It was a warm, peaceful light. A light for the night time.

Erin was wide awake now, but for the moment her sleeplessness seemed unimportant. She pulled the curtains open a few inches and knelt down, resting her chin on the windowsill so that she could still see across the road. A couple lived in that house. Middle-aged.

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She felt almost excited. It did not necessarily mean they were in the same situation as she was, though. It was probably just coincidence. Perhaps one of them had got up to get a drink of water, or was not feeling well. But she could see the curtains were closed in all the other windows in the house. Maybe that room would go dark in a few minutes, she thought. Maybe it was just a brief interruption in their sleep.

A woman walked from one side of the window to the other. Erin ducked down, but after a few seconds her curiosity became an anxious itch and she tentatively raised her head. The woman was standing still in the middle of the room, now. The wife. She was not moving or saying anything, she was just standing there. Her pale hair caught the glow of the lamp, and her face was contoured with deep shadows. What Erin noticed most of all, what made her chest tight, was that she was still dressed. She was wearing a pink V-neck jumper and she could just make out the top of her grey work trousers. Erin did not think that was the room they used as a bedroom. The woman had not gone to bed at all; she had not even tried.

Erin’s knees started to throb so she shifted until she was cross-legged, but that took a few inches of height from her view and she could not see as much as before. She crawled away from the window, then stood up, grabbing the lumpy cushion from her chair and her phone from the bedside table. She crouched when the woman came back into view, scared to catch her eye.

The woman had brought her hand to her mouth and was tugging and pinching at her bottom lip. For a moment she seemed deep in thought, but then her posture suddenly slackened. Her hand dropped back to her side. She looked up. She looked around. Then she came closer to the window. Erin ducked again, heart beating fast. She carefully moved to the edge of the window frame so she could see her from a
safer angle. The woman was leaning forward, resting her elbows on the sill and pressing her hands to her cheeks so that her chin was scrunched up where she was cupping it in her palms. She stayed that way for a long time, just looking out at the sleeping street.

Erin could not check the time on her phone; she was afraid the glow from the screen would catch the woman’s attention. It must be nearing three, she thought.

She did not move for a while, and neither did the woman across the street. She wondered if the woman was regularly awake at that hour. When she used to sleep right through the night, she would never have known if someone else was awake, watching her dark house and all the other dark houses for signs of life. But even during the day, she had not particularly taken notice of that house before. She had seen the woman, and her husband, leaving the house or washing the car. Opening the door to accept a parcel. But always out of the corner of her eye and not enough to attract her full attention. She had never really looked. Not like she was looking now.

The woman could not see Erin from where she was sitting. And the way the woman was watching the street made Erin think that every house on her side of the street was dark, too; she must have felt as though she was the only person awake for miles. That was how Erin had been feeling.

The woman finally moved, stretching her arms in front of her and massaging the nape of her neck. Erin realised that she had not been thinking about anything for a while. She did not think she had closed her eyes, but there was a sensation of coming back, of returning to the moment and being unable to remember what happened a few minutes ago. It was the same as when she drifted off to sleep, but just before she started to dream. She felt sleepy. She also felt cold. She had not acknowledged it before, but there was a peculiar night chill in her skin. It was not like being cold in the
day, when she would shiver and could feel it in her hands and cheeks. It was a kind of
prickling wave that rolled over different parts of her body. It was around her knees,
and then it crept up to the small of her back, along her shoulders and down across her
ribs. Her muscles would be stiff in the morning, she could tell.

She thought she could sleep, though. She honestly thought she could sleep.
The woman had moved away. The light was still on but she had gone from the
window. Erin stood up. Her legs thrummed with jabbing pain and she could not
straighten properly at first. She raised her hand, but decided not to touch the open
curtains. She left the cushion on the floor and hobbled to the bed. It was a little after
four; later than she had thought. Perhaps she really did fall asleep where she was
sitting. That was a good thing.

The duvet was cold when Erin folded it back over her and chills continued to
ripple along her body. It quickly warmed up, though, and then she found that she
could not keep her eyes open.

Chapter 2

Erin woke to the noise of her alarm. She was dreaming about something, although she
instantly forgot the moment her eyes opened. She must have fallen asleep as soon as
she got back into bed. Three hours. It was not great, but she was excited that she had
managed to drop off so easily. Maybe she was fine now, she thought. Maybe sitting
still, thinking about that woman, thinking about nothing, was the trick she was
missing. Perhaps she just needed to find that quiet again. It seemed so ridiculous
suddenly, that she was lying awake for hours when all she needed to do was think
about nothing. If she slept normally tonight, then she thought it would all be okay.

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She turned her head to look in the direction of the window. For a moment, she wondered why there was a cushion on the floor. When she got up, she gasped as her neck rang with pain. She could barely move her head. In the night, she had been sitting on the floor, so she could only blame herself for the ache. And she had been slouching, too, judging by the tightness at the bottom of her spine. She tried to straighten up, to stretch out the sore muscles, but it only hurt worse. She felt a hundred years old that morning.

Erin struggled against her own body throughout the day. She felt peculiar. Drunk. She tried to put the cereal box in the fridge. A few minutes later, she sat on the bed to pull on her socks and had to fight to keep her eyes open. Really fight. She rubbed her eyelids until they were sore, then she splashed cold water on her face but it made her jerk in shock and that sent more pain shooting down her neck. She was late for work again and she was nowhere near ready to leave the house. She pulled on some trousers and opted for a jumper; she could not face shirt buttons.

She heard a door slam. She looked down at the street, and saw the woman from last night holding out an oval key and unlocking her car. She was wearing different clothes. Erin watched as she threw a large shopping bag into the back seat. She got in the car and pulled down the visor above the steering wheel, checking her hair in the mirror for a moment. The engine started, and she moved up the street and out of view. She did all of that in a few seconds and with a fluidity that left Erin staring stupidly at the space where her car had been parked. The woman had been up later than Erin. Last night. Erin did not understand. But there were lots of basic things she did not understand that day. She knew she just needed to put shoes on and leave, but she was sure she would forget something. She did not care. It was Friday, she
thought. No one cares about anything on a Friday. She just had to stay awake until she got home again and then she could sleep.

Later, at exactly eight o’clock in the evening, she gently pulled back the edge of the blinds in her living room until she could see across the road. All the curtains were still open in the woman’s house, and the window by the door was flickering blue and white from the television. Erin wondered if the woman was dreading going to sleep, too. Maybe she was sitting there with her husband worrying about what she would do when he patted his thighs and declared it was time for bed. And maybe she would feel a stab of anger when he heaved himself up and asked if he was due a clean pair of pyjamas tonight because that was the only thing he had to worry about when it came to sleeping.

She worked through a mug of camomile tea – she had bought a box of it on the way home – but it tasted as strange as it smelled. Like buttery straw. But she stuck with it; it would relax her. That was what it said online. She thought about a particularly disgusting course of antibiotics she had had to take for tonsillitis when she was a child. Supposedly banana flavoured. But she had become used to it over time, and when she got to the end of the bottle it did not taste that bad at all. Erin wondered if this would be the same. Anyway, it did not matter to her if she liked it or not, as long as it worked and helped her sleep.

She heard the phone trilling from far away. The first ring sounded like a penny dropped down a well, and when it repeated it still was not very clear. Erin knew she had not been asleep, but she still felt groggy and confused as though she had been woken up from something. She sat still and waited for the ringing to stop. It did. Then, after a few seconds’ meaningful pause, it started again.
She could not ignore it a second time. If she had been on the brink of sleeping, the sound of the phone had thrown her far away and now she could not get back. She was alert. She was also annoyed. She knew it was Mum.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi, Erin. It’s only me. Have I interrupted something?’

‘No,’ she said. She winced, and started to look in the kitchen cupboards for something to eat to make the next hour more bearable.

‘I know, I’m sorry, I should have sent you a text first to see if you were busy. You might have had plans.’

‘No.’

‘What’s that noise? What are you doing?’

‘Eating cereal.’ Erin rammed a handful of dry cornflakes in her mouth, crunching loudly into the phone.

‘Ha! Eating cereal on a Friday night. I don’t know.’ Mum’s voice trailed off in a sighing giggle, and then Erin heard a deliberate clink of glass on glass. ‘Well, not that I’m doing anything exciting! Although Susie and Phil have just been over, haven’t they, Dad?’

Mum paused. Then, more distantly, Erin heard her repeat the question. Somewhere else in the house, Dad made a noise.

‘Yes,’ she continued, speaking into the phone again. ‘They’ve just been over for a chat. Susie was asking about you. I said you were plodding along nicely.’

Erin thought of a herd of cartoon elephants, dust ballooning around their feet with each slow step. Plodding. She munched on another handful of cornflakes.

‘I was telling her about Rhys’s promotion – she was very interested. She says her grandkids are going to be staying at the camp this summer. Funny how these
things go full circle, isn’t it? I remember the first time he went with school. Anyway, now I’m just relaxing with a little glass of wine – I know, I am a terror! But I thought I’d see how you were doing.’

‘Fine. Everything’s fine.’

‘That’s good. Great. And how’s work?’

Mum was asking a lot of questions tonight. Perhaps Susie really did ask about Erin and Mum realised she did not have an awful lot to say. But maybe that was Erin’s fault, she thought. She put the cereal away and went to settle down on the sofa. She decided she wanted to make more of an effort, so she started to tell Mum about a recent incident with the computers. But half-way through her story, Erin realised Mum was being too quiet. She was not listening; she was distracted by something.

‘Mum.’

‘Hm? I am listening. Go on.’

‘Are you watching something?’

‘Oh, only one of those daft challenge shows – it’s about to go off. They’re supposed to be celebrities but I’ve no idea who this bloke is. Who’s that?’

‘Doesn’t he do the weather?’ said Dad in the background.

‘Does he? Well, he’s going to injure himself in a minute. Sorry, Erin, what were you saying?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Yes, you can. Something about…oh…oh no, he fell in!’ Her parents both barked with laughter. ‘Yes, so all the school’s files went missing. What happened next?’

‘Not missing – it turns out that this boy had just hidden them,’ Erin started to explain, but then she seemed to slow down. She did not have the energy to keep on
with her story; her head was beginning to throb and she could not untangle her thoughts. She could see in her mind what had happened – the Year Six teacher clicking through folder after folder down an endless rabbit hole to retrieve the class documents – but it was somehow unreachable. Erin found she could not describe it to Mum. But she also did not want to; she wanted to stay quiet and not think about communicating. Her words became quieter and quieter. It felt better not to talk.

Mum’s tone shifted and she was suddenly serious. ‘Are you ill?’

Erin’s heart started to beat quickly, a sudden burst of urgency that flung her out of her drowsiness just as quickly as she had fallen into it. She cleared her throat to sound more confident. ‘No, why?’

‘It sounds like you’re half-asleep.’

‘I’m fine,’ Erin said. ‘Honestly.’

‘Good.’

‘I’d say you sound strange, too, but you’re always drinking when you call me so I can’t remember what you actually sound like.’

She did not mean to say it. Her thumb hovered over the ‘end call’ button. She should have pressed it then. She should have said there was bad reception, that they could pick up the conversation another night when Mum would likely have forgotten. But she was frozen. She had prodded the snake and now, when it was about to bite her, Erin could not move her limbs.

Mum did her public laugh – a two-note cackle she would use like a warning call when she was about to start an argument with someone. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Nothing. Sorry.’

‘Because if you’re implying –’
‘I’m not. I’m sorry. You’re right, I am ill. I have a really bad headache. A migraine. Like the ones you get.’

Silence. ‘You know that’s no excuse. I never use it as an excuse.’

‘No. I know. Sorry.’

‘What’s she been in?’ Dad interrupted.

‘Just a second, Erin,’ said Mum. ‘Who?’

‘Too slow - she’s gone.’

‘Oh, you are daft.’

‘I should…Mum, I’m going to say bye, now,’ she said, loudly in case Mum had put the phone in her lap. Their voices sounded distant.

‘Hm? Yes, all right.’

‘Thanks for calling. Speak to you next week,’ Erin said, quickly hanging up before Mum could respond.

Now that she thought about it, she could not remember the last time she actually treated their phone calls as anything other than a once-a-week ritual, a chore, an hour of mm-hmms before she drew the curtains and settled into the weekend. Sleep-deprived or not, she did not talk very much. It was not that she did not have things to say, it was just that she did not think Mum wanted to hear them. And Mum seemed to be satisfied if she did all the talking, anyway.

In bed, things seemed to be going well until she jerked violently, with her whole body crashing down onto the mattress. She was remembering seeing the woman from across the road. She had not really been thinking about anything; she was just letting the memory play out again. And she did not think she was asleep, but in her mind she was looking down at her shoes as she walked and then she felt her foot slip off the pavement. She bolted upright in bed. She could not have been asleep

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because she was awake when she started thinking about seeing the woman. She had only been in bed for half an hour.

She was supposed to relax after drinking camomile tea, but she still felt just as tense. And then she was annoyed because the dose had not worked. Maybe she should have had it earlier. Or made more of it. Maybe it had to build up in her system. She was not sure. Perhaps she should have had it after Mum had called, not before.

She did not stay in bed for long. She threw back the duvet and crept over to the window. She had left her curtains open on purpose, and as soon as she got near she could see the light on in the woman’s window. Erin immediately felt better. It was like returning to familiar surroundings on the way back from a long trip.

She went back to the bedside table and switched on the lamp. It cast a thin orange glow up the wall and across the ceiling but blended into the darkness before it reached the other side of the room. It was dim, but it made a difference. The woman’s curtains were open, too, like last time; she would be able to see Erin’s light if she looked out of her window.

Erin watched across the road for a few minutes. It was a chill, cloudless night and she soon started to shiver. Nothing changed in the woman’s room – but Erin knew she must be in there because the rest of the house was dark. She must be sitting up and just out of sight. Erin was cold, though, so she got back into bed. She kept the lamp switched on and tried to sleep.

Even with her eyes closed, it felt nice to have the lamp on, to know that she was not in the dark. If the woman walked past her window, the light across the road would catch her eye. Erin wanted the woman to know she was awake with her. It was a signal, her lamp. It was a kind of connection between the two bedrooms; someone else is awake with you, the lamp seemed to say.
The boiler rumbled into life. It woke Erin up with a start; she did not know what was happening. When she realised where the noise was coming from, she panicked; the boiler switched itself on half an hour after her alarm. She picked up her phone, and saw that her alarm was not set. When had she turned it off? Why had she turned it off?

Panicking, she got out of bed too quickly, and only made it a few steps before she had to retreat and sit down. Her head was spinning. She did not feel well at all. She certainly did not feel awake. It would be fine, she thought; she still had an hour before she needed to leave for work. But what if the boiler had not woken her up? She would have slept well into the day, missing work without a phone call to excuse herself. That was not like her. She wanted to call in sick. No one at work would mind, but a lack of sleep seemed hardly a good reason to be absent.

It became more and more difficult for Erin to keep her eyes open. She attempted to stand up again. She was still veering to the left with dizziness, and she hurried to the landing to cling to the bannister, planting her feet firmly on each step as she made her way downstairs. She had breakfast while watching the kitchen clock, but she found she could not manage more than a few mouthfuls of cereal. Next door's children slammed the front door at eight and she was not even dressed yet. She gave up on eating and hurried back upstairs. The old shirt she wore to bed was crumpled on her duvet. She picked it up. There was a hole fraying along the edge of the collar, and the washing label had faded blank. It was pretty awful, Erin thought, when she looked at it closely like that. Everything she wore to bed was the same. It did not seem to matter when she was a student, but now she wondered if she needed to practise a little more self-care when it came to sleeping. She decided to buy herself some proper
pyjamas on the way home that afternoon. She threw the shirt on the unmade bed and continued her rush to get ready.

Pat, her co-worker, was standing at the front desk when Erin walked in. They waved to each other. The wind had stung Erin’s face on the way there, but the library’s heating was on full and her cheeks immediately started burning up. A sudden jolt passed through her head and she had to stop mid-way through removing her coat. It felt as though her brain was vibrating. She stared at the seam between two carpet tiles, blinking furiously to try to focus. It only lasted for a second, easing off as quickly as it started. Then she felt fine again. Erin looked up. Pat was watching her.

‘Are you all right?’ Pat asked, walking around the desk towards Erin. ‘You looked like you’d left your straightening irons on. And then you went pale and I didn’t know if you were going to pass out or what.’

She put the back of her hand to Erin’s cheek. ‘You’re boiling. There’s something going around, you know. I bet you’ve got it.’

Erin shook her head. ‘I haven’t been sleeping properly.’

Pat tilted her chin to the ceiling, as though Erin said something worth celebrating. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I get like that sometimes. Awful, isn’t it?’

‘You do?’

‘Of course. Best thing to do is give up. If it gets to two in the morning I say to myself, “Pat, it’s just not happening.” And then I get up and do something for an hour or two, and try again. Sure, it means I’ll sleep less, but it’s better than staring at the ceiling.’

Her lips were clamped together and her eyes were bright. She was waiting for Erin to ask her a question; it was as though she had been anxious to discuss this with
someone, especially with someone who had so much to learn about the subject. Erin indulged her, but not entirely out of politeness.

‘What do you do?’ she asked.

Pat leant forward as though to share a secret. ‘Nothing that requires a lot of thought. I might wipe down the kitchen counter, or sometimes I listen to the radio if I can’t stop thinking about something. I don’t read, though. Don’t take anything in. I want to be at least a little productive.’

Erin nodded, but there was something prickling in her stomach. She could feel the memory of weight on her chest, growing sharper as she stood there. She ran her hand across the bottom of her shirt. Wiping down the kitchen? Pat made sleeplessness seem so uneventful, like waiting for a cake to bake in the oven. Did Pat see things at night? Things that seemed real? Things that made her too afraid to go back to sleep?

‘I saw –’

‘Goodness,’ Pat said. ‘Were you lying there the whole time?’

The pressure on her stomach now felt as though someone was holding her from behind. She could not tell Pat. Pat would not understand. Erin grinned and tried to laugh. ‘Tossing and turning. I thought about getting up, but I was paranoid that I was only a few minutes away from sleep. I didn’t want to miss my chance.’

‘It’s not like waiting for a bus, sweetheart. Deary me. But as I said, nights like those come and go. It’s natural. Happens to everyone. I’m sure you’ll be fine tonight, especially because you’re so tired. You’ll be asleep in no time.’

‘Do you usually feel…ill, too?’ Erin asked.

‘When I was younger, certainly. Felt like I’d been through the washing machine a few times. My body’s used to it now.’

Erin draped her coat over her arm and they walked back to the front desk.
‘Could be you’re a bit dehydrated,’ Pat said. ‘If you’re going to be awake for six hours, you need to drink more.’

Erin thanked her. She remembered the way the man from the library had stood in the corner of her bedroom. Dehydrated?

Erin took a detour on the way home from work, walking down into the main streets of town. It was cold; the sunlight was a watery glow, and now, just after five, the thick clouds were darkening. The streetlamps had already come on, and the puddles rippled with fluorescent orange. There were not many people around. Everyone seemed to be going straight home. She bought herself some pyjamas. Two sets. They were more expensive than she was expecting, but if it helped her sleep then she supposed it would be worth it.

After dinner, Erin checked her email account; there was a new message from Dad.

‘Hi Erin. Bought a new printer for the office. Has a scanner! Very high-tech. Just figuring out how to use it. I got a box of photos down from the attic and thought I’d scan them in – I’ve sent you a few. You were a cutie! See you soon. Dad.’

She laughed softly and clicked on the first of five attachments. A photograph appeared; bright but old-looking. It was a beach, and Erin and her big brother Rhys were standing on the dark, wet sand holding hands. She was clutching a bucket; he had a green net attached to a length of shiny bamboo. They looked young. She might have been about four years old, which would have made Rhys eight. That seemed right. But she did not remember where the picture was taken.

Her eyes lingered on the hands – the tight jumble of fingers that showed both excitement and her brother’s protectiveness over his little sister.
She had not seen Rhys for months. Six months, maybe longer. Over the past few years, ever since Rhys had started working for Bryn Hen youth camp, they had been getting on badly. It was not like the bickering and disagreements of childhood – it was worse. It was awkward and silent. They did not know what to say to each other. He was much louder when he spoke, used to projecting his voice up trees or across lakes, and he was so big now. He seemed to fill the living room of their parents’ home. His legs were like an elephant’s, but he was shaggy like a bear: she had difficulty seeing her brother in him. They had gradually stopped sending each other messages. She did not know how to start talking to him again, but at the same time she was not sure whether she really wanted to.

She sighed, and opened another photograph. It was a picture of their old red car. She could see the tip of Dad’s finger, pale and blurry, in the top left corner. The next two were childhood Christmas photos and she did not pause to look at them.

In the final photograph was a group of children in front of a large, pea-green hut. Bryn Hen. Erin did not register the faces at first, but then she recognised her eyes peering back at her. She was older than in the first photograph; her hair was darker and her face was less round. She was standing next to her friend Sarah; they both looked comically confused.

She knew she should have found it funny, or at least pleasantly nostalgic, but she could not quite bring herself to laugh. Something about the photograph unsettled her. Sarah had moved schools shortly after that trip. Erin could not remember why. Her eyes lingered over her friend’s face.

She was suddenly restless. Her thoughts were flitting from one thing to another and her heart was beating hard; she could hear it deep and muffled in her ears.
She made the photograph vanish and logged out of her email. Lifting her shoulders, she breathed deeply.

After a glass of cold water, she settled down again. She remembered why she had opened her laptop in the first place. She went back to the kitchen table.

It was always a bad idea, but she could not resist the temptation to search for symptoms of insomnia. When the listed effects – memory loss, disorientation, irritability, hallucinations – made her uneasy, she decided instead to look for home treatments. She scrolled through a few articles and forums about how to fall asleep quickly.

There must be something she was missing, she thought, some little tiny thing that her body suddenly needed. If she could find what it was, she would be able to sleep normally again. Perhaps the pyjamas would fix it, but it could not hurt to browse for some more advice. It was a case of trial and error.

Ironically, the websites all told her to stop looking at screens at least an hour before bed. Something about blue light. She did not know what that meant. But she always checked her email account one last time when she got into bed – that probably did not help. Those articles made Erin feel as though she had not been doing enough. She had never given sleep much thought before, but it was not as simple a process as it used to be. She needed to make more of an effort.

One of the tips suggested staying awake for as long as possible or until the temptation to sleep grew strong. It could be that she had been going to bed too early. She had indulged in years of deep, uninterrupted nights of sleep and now her body had decided it needed to adjust to a shorter rest. That could be it. She decided to stay awake until midnight, reading for as long as possible. She turned off the laptop and took her phone upstairs, shutting it in the drawer in her bedside cabinet. She took a
blanket from the spare room and carried it downstairs, and then she filled a glass with water and tipped a few plain biscuits onto a plate. She made the area around the sofa perfect and calming. She brought a book from the shelf and began her effort to stay awake.

After a while, she could not focus on the words. She found her eyes had stopped moving and she was staring at a blank point between two lines. She was not thinking about anything; it was as though her brain had paused and she was left gazing into an infinite space. She looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was just after midnight. She thought she would attempt to keep reading for a little while longer. Trying to recover her place, she realised she had not taken in most of what was written on the page. It was all unfamiliar to her. She started again from the top but quickly lost herself again. It seemed like a precursor for sleep, so she put the book on the coffee table and climbed the stairs to bed.

In the bathroom mirror, Erin watched herself brushing her teeth, struggling to keep her eyes open. She gave in and closed them for a few seconds, feeling the roughness of the bristles against her gums, enjoying the rhythm of the sound it made. She wondered if she could sleep standing up, but it was a small bathroom and she would likely hit her head if she suddenly dropped to the floor. She rinsed her brush, and then stared at it for a moment, trying to remember where it went. This was a good sign, she thought. She continued to get ready, leaving her eyes shut as much as possible, falling into the feeling of being within reach of sleep.

She fumbled with the buttons on her new pyjamas. She realised she should have changed into them a few hours ago; it felt too different to what she normally wore. The fabric was soft, but also stiff and synthetic. It did not smell like her. The waistband of the trousers was wide and clung gingerly to the bones of her hips. She
could not see her feet any more. The sleeves, too, were longer than her arms. But Erin
told herself that they were supposed to be loose-fitting. She would get used to wearing
them. She was sure it would help. She moved towards the bed, and fell heavily onto
the mattress. After a brief adjustment to her position, she settled.

Her breath kept catching like a rubber ball in her chest, jolting her away from
sleep. She felt as though she were looking down into a well – there was a strange,
cavernous depth to her eyelids. The well seemed to expand around her; she lost her
sense of perception until she felt incredibly small in an endless space. She caught
herself wondering if sleep would ever find her when she was surrounded by so much
nothingness.

Strange thoughts multiplied and swarmed like a cloud of midges. The voice in
her head seemed abnormally loud and persistent; random words and images repeated
over and over and snatches of music snagged on the same few notes. By trying to
breathe deeply and calm her pounding heart, she felt she was mocking sleep. Sleep
seemed to take a form, a personality, and she thought that it did not like the way she
had positioned herself and refused to give her the rest she craved.

It was ridiculous. She was thinking ridiculous things. She felt closer to
madness than to sleep.

She opened her eyes and sat up in a bid to chase the frantic thoughts away. It
worked; her mind seemed quieter, now, and the world around her was not quite so
vast.

But she was aware of how alone she was. There were fewer cars on the road
now. Every time she heard the distant rumble of an engine, she found she felt better.
There was someone else awake, too, she thought. There was someone else who would
not sleep until three or four o’clock in the morning.
A car passed again a few moments later and Erin listened closely to the comforting noise. She checked the time on her phone: it was nearly half past two. When the car had gone, the silence felt stiflingly thick. Minutes passed, and Erin heard nothing else. She was alone, stranded, left behind.

She lay down again. Soon, her limbs began to twitch; first her fingers and toes kept curling slightly as though in response to having been touched, but then her legs and arms began to jerk and she could not control it. Her body cried out to be moved and rearranged. Her left arm ached until she stretched it. Then she needed to yawn and to scratch the side of her nose and to move away from where a mattress spring pressed into her skin. And every time she fidgeted, she grew increasingly frustrated.

She got out of bed and went to the window. Checking to see if the woman was awake was becoming a routine, now. The opposite house was dark. From the light of the streetlamp she could see that the curtains were open in the room where she usually saw the woman, but the comforting glow was not there. Erin’s mouth began to tremble, and she bit her bottom lip. She watched for a minute, just in case, but went back to bed with a new heaviness in her chest.

Chapter 3

Erin’s sleep did not improve over the following two weeks. At first she continued to be hopeful that she would, eventually, sleep normally again, but it never happened and then she began to dread the thought of going to bed at all. Every spare moment she had at home was spent searching the internet for advice, but nothing she tried
made any difference. The new pyjamas had not worked, though she continued to wear them every night. She tried to stay up as late as she could, to read and to take a hot shower thirty minutes before bed, and yet she still could not fall asleep before three o’clock in the morning. She even tried to meditate, sitting on her sofa and closing her eyes, but she was so exhausted that she did not have the energy to keep her scampering thoughts under control. Nothing helped.

She took a sick day. She had not been able to move when her alarm rang, and stayed watching the milky light of dawn poke through her curtains. Lying in bed felt like a deceitful thing to do. She could hear front doors closing and cars starting along the street, and she was somehow ashamed to be turning her back on the day. Guilt stewed in her stomach.

Taking time off work was rare for her. She hated going back to the library after a sick day and having the feeling that she had missed something important. She could usually convince herself that her illness was not bad enough to stay at home. Something was different, though. The tiredness was more than the itching in her eyes or the migraine radiating down her neck; her body was suddenly too heavy to move, and the voice in her head telling her to get up was small and unconvincing.

Did she really need her job? Yes, of course she did. She probably had enough saved to live on her own for a few months, but that would run out. Where would she go? Back to her parents. Back to Mum. She groaned at the idea, but she still could not move. As the morning crept on, the image of Mum’s disapproving face grew stronger, and Erin finally got out of bed.

She had to at least do something. She had to see a doctor.

The town clinic operated on a same-day appointment service, so she needed to be quick before all the slots were taken. She went down to the kitchen and tried to
call, but the line was busy. Hurriedly, she dressed and went out; it would be easier, she thought, just to turn up.

The surgery was only a few minutes’ walk from her house, down away from town and next to the big high school. She followed teenagers with their bags bumping the backs of their knees as they walked along the pavement. She had not eaten before she left, and now she felt light and fragile. Her head was cloudy, too. Everything she saw and heard seemed distant; the teenagers’ conversations did not quite make sense and the arrhythmic padding of their black shoes lulled her until she could not focus on anything else.

Suddenly, she was facing a man. He held the surgery door open for her from the inside. She looked behind her. The teenagers were far away, some lingering by the gates, some filing slowly to the entrance of the school on the right. She could not remember walking through the car park

‘You first, love,’ he prompted.

She stepped through the door, muttering a polite comment. He coughed in response – a deep and rattling sound.

The inside reminded her of a train station. On either side of a long aisle were plastic seats in which blotchy-faced children wriggled and older people sat gazing up at flickering television screens, waiting for their names to move up the list.

‘…but we can’t get it to you until Monday,’ the receptionist was saying to a young man when Erin approached the desk.

The man sighed and anxiously ruffled his hair. She noticed that the knuckles of his left hand were bleeding.

‘It’s fine,’ he said, in a tone that did not sound fine. ‘I’m not desperate.’
‘I’m sorry,’ the receptionist said. She kept her eyes fixed on the computer screen. ‘But come first thing on Monday, all right?’

He walked away, head down. Erin stepped forward. The receptionist looked up, scanning her face as though predicting the reason why she had come.

‘I’d like to book an appointment, please.’

‘Is it an emergency? Can I ask what’s the nature of the problem?’

Erin felt her neck stiffen. She opened her mouth, but did not say anything. The receptionist ignored her and looked at the screen.

‘I can fit you in with Dr Howells at nine-fifteen. Can I take a name?’

‘I can’t sleep,’ Erin said, quietly so only the receptionist could hear.

She did not move. ‘And the name, please?’

‘Erin Roberts. I think I’ve registered. It was a long time ago, though. I haven’t been before. I haven’t needed to.’

‘You’re on the system,’ she said, eyes flitting over the keyboard as she typed.

‘If you’d like to take a seat.’

Erin paused for a moment, then went to sit down. She chose a chair with no one on either side. After a while, her name appeared at the bottom of the television screens. She turned in her seat; her name was on the other wall, too. Her face grew hot. She started to fidget, pulling at the end of her shirt, tugging at the hair by her ears.

One of the office doors opened to the left of where Erin was sitting and a woman appeared. She looked like Mum; same greying haircut, same thin, questioning mouth.

‘Paul?’ the woman said, eyes skipping from one waiting patient to the next. ‘Is Paul Norton here?’
She waited a few more seconds, then went back into the room. Erin then noticed the name on the door: Dr Howells.

The door opened again.

‘Erin Roberts.’

Erin stood up, but did not look at Dr Howells. Instead, she walked quickly past waiting patients, dodging a pram that stuck out into the aisle.

‘Erin Roberts?’

An elderly woman was going towards the front door and Erin sped up to get there first. She ran out into the cold morning air, breathless and shaking.

At ten o’clock that evening, Erin started to switch things off. She walked slowly from room to room, trying to be calm but it was difficult to ignore the unease beginning to squirm around in her chest.

Walking past the bedroom window, she noticed that the living room lights were still on across the road. She thought about waiting for the house to go dark, but she was too desperate to sleep, to get rid of some of her tiredness. She left her curtains open, though, and switched on the lamp so the room was softly lit. She wanted the woman to be able to see it when she looked out.

Erin burrowed down into her bed. But before she had even closed her eyes, she knew she would not sleep. She was not in the right frame of mind.

She rolled onto her side and vowed not to move or open her eyes again. Fidgeting only made her feel worse; she thought of sleep as a board game, and every time she shifted position she was sent right back to the first square. She started to count, but she could not get further than sixty before her mind started to wander. She reeled her thoughts back in and tried again. She counted several times. There were
moments when she stopped thinking about anything at all and then she would happily
tell herself that she must be close to falling asleep, and that made her alert and awake
again.

It felt as though she was going around in an endless circle, miles away from
where she would find sleep. She was doing it all wrong. Frustrated, she gave up, and
reached out towards her phone to check the time. It was almost midnight. She had
been lying there counting in her head for almost two hours.

She suddenly thought about Rhys’s purple GameBoy, but she had not seen him
with it for a long time and she did not think they even made them like that any more.
She saw him blowing into the cartridge slot on the back, and holding it close to his
eyes to check for dust.

She rolled onto her side away from the wall. Then something overcame her:
she moved right to the edge of the mattress and looked down until she could see under
the bed. It was dark, but she could make out the edges of a long storage chest. She
used to do this when she a child, she remembered. What had she looked for, back
then? Something familiar and comforting – like a blanket but different.

It was a box. She had had some sort of box – a big, red, plastic biscuit tub.
And when she was young she would reach under her bed for it. She had done it so
often that it had become a habit.

This was during the time when Erin had suffered nightmares.

Erin lay back and tried to remember what was in the box. She had forgotten
what the nightmares were about, but she knew they had made her too afraid to sleep.

Rhys had come home from Scouts one evening with a list of things he needed
to pack for a weekend-long hike. It was for a survival kit of sorts, and he was thrilled
by the thought of a dangerous mountain walk. Dad had given him a cracked lunchbox

Alice Vernon
from the garage and Rhys had paraded importantly through the house with it, gathering bits and consulting his list every five minutes. Erin had followed him while he did this; in spite of herself, she had been fascinated by the way he assembled the pack. She had found him in the bathroom, sitting cross-legged on the floor with the contents of the box of plasters spread in front of him like tarot cards. He had chosen the biggest plasters and put them in the lunchbox – he had obviously imagined himself in a life-or-death situation.

Later, Mum had given him a packet of mints from her handbag, and Dad had found his old metal whistle he kept in a sock in the back of his wardrobe.

Erin had wanted to contribute something, too, so that she would be the one to indirectly save his life and then he would be forced to thank her. She had ransacked her bedroom, scrabbling through her chest of drawers and spilling the contents of boxes and tins onto the carpet. But she did not have anything useful for surviving the wilderness. She only had one pair of scissors, and they were plastic with zig-zag blades that scrunched and mangled the paper rather than cut it. Then she had found a bag of marbles. Rhys had good aim, she had thought, perhaps he would be able to fight off wild animals with them.

But as she searched for items, she had become increasingly distracted by all the things scattered around her. She had started to imagine all the ways she could use a survival kit of her own. First, she had pictured herself fending off a bear with her plastic scissors, but then she had become more serious.

Downstairs, she had quietly asked Dad for a spare box. Any size. She had told him she was doing some organising – putting a few things away – because she had not wanted Rhys to find out and accuse her of copying him.
She had taken it up to her room and shut the door. Henry, her stuffed lion, was lying on his side on her bed. She put him next to her on the floor and together they had drawn up a list like the one Rhys had. She had put marbles in the box, some of her favourite plastic lions, a wallet of photographs from her last trip to the zoo, a notepad and crayons. Then, over the next few days she had added boxes of raisins, tissues and cotton wool so she could stifle the sound of the house creaking in the dark. When it was ready, she had pushed the box under her bed. The evenings had not been so scary, then, because she thought she had everything she needed to survive being alone in the night.

Erin now wondered if something similar would help. She could not say what was causing her inability to sleep, and she therefore did not know what she needed to have in order to help her situation.

The silence in the room inflated, as though all sound had been absorbed into it. If there was any similarity between those terrifying nights of her childhood and now, it was that Erin was aware of her own solitude, and she hated it. Being by herself had never bothered her. But usually she chose to be alone, and chose when to see other people. Now she felt like an outcast – that everyone had rejected her the moment sleep did.

She got out of bed and went downstairs. She took a notebook and pen from a shelf in the living room and brought it up with her. In the dark, the white paper seemed to glow. She closed her eyes and moved the pen slowly across its surface, and she could feel the little ball in the nib like a car rattling over a country road. She looked at the scribbles, and then she drew a house. The roof was lop-sided.

The movement of the pen soothed her. She forgot about the irregular pounding of her heart, and it had been a while since she had looked at the time. Ideas, faces,
characters were forming in her head and, for the moment, jotting them down seemed to stifle any other thoughts.

She drew another house; this one was bigger – big enough for windows so she drew herself looking comically unhappy like a ghost in a photograph. She put a crescent moon above the roof, then moved the pen down and started to draw stick figures in the space to the right of the house. Soon there was a crowd of them on the paper.

She blacked out all the windows in the house, scribbling over her upturned mouth and cartoon teardrop, and re-drew herself among the group of figures. Then they began to talk to each other, this gathering of sleepless people. It was just small talk – things like ‘nice night’ and ‘I’ve brought snacks this time’. They did not talk about how tired they were; these people met every night to keep each other company so they knew one another very well. They did not need to mention their tiredness any more. She began to give them all names. Ian was the tallest, and he could not sleep because he and his partner had a new baby. Vivian’s neighbours were loud. Marc was like Erin, and could not work out why he was still awake.

The sound of tearing paper was like thunder in the room. The drawings were in her hand and she scrunched the paper into a ball and threw it; it hit the wardrobe and lay still and crumpled in the middle of the floor.

When she lay back down again, however, the stories that had been forming while she was drawing continued to build in her mind.

She wondered how the woman across the road faced the start of the night. Did she dread it? Did she watch the clock tick towards evening with a growing sense of anxiety? Or was she used to it, by now? She pictured the woman sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing her face with her hands and turning to look at her snuffling husband.
with affection and resentment. Fragments of questions and phrases and images rattled through Erin’s head like an old reel of film. She watched them, tried to slow them down, but there were so many things she wanted to know. The images became softer, and seemed to slow down.

There was a noise. It came from outside; a soft click that did not sound like anything Erin usually heard at that time of the night. It could have been a window opening or closing. Maybe a door.

Her letterbox crashed and she scrambled upright in fear. Her heart was beating painfully fast and blood was rushing in her ears. She grabbed her phone with a trembling hand. Was she being burgled? She waited, barely breathing, poised to call the police. Every muscle in her body was tense and ready to snap like elastic. But she did not hear anything else.

She was in the doorway of her living room, squinting against the light. There was a small piece of paper lying on her doormat. It was folded in half. At first, she hesitated to get any closer. If someone wanted something, they would have knocked. They would have seen that her bedroom lamp was on and her curtains were open and they would have assumed that she was awake. Or they would have waited until morning. But the paper seemed almost to glow with an impatience to be read, and she went to pick up the note.

_I can’t sleep, either_, it said. _From Bridget at Number 9_. Underneath, there was a mobile phone number.

Erin stood on the rough mat and read the note again and again until the letters blurred into each other. Even if she would not admit it to herself, she knew that this was what she had hoped would happen. But now she could not move. Maybe she was
shy, she thought, or maybe she just had not expected the woman to make contact at all. Bridget. That was her name. Erin wanted to talk to her.

Upstairs, she stood by the window for a minute, looking across the road. She expected Bridget to be standing there, but all she could see was the dim light from the window. Erin picked up her phone and went back to the window, carefully typing the numbers Bridget had written on the note. She admired Bridget’s handwriting – the letters were big and rolled over each other like a beach ball caught in a gust of wind. She checked the numbers she had typed into her phone with those on the note, and then she checked twice more. Her thumb hovered over the big green ‘call’ icon, but the same hesitation she had felt downstairs was creeping back. Suppose it was a joke, that someone had been watching Erin watch the woman, and she was about to call a takeaway or an escort hotline. And she felt anxious, too, as though she would not be the sort of person Bridget wanted to talk to after all. Or maybe Bridget would disappoint her. That would not happen, Erin thought, following the gentle loops of Bridget’s handwriting again.

Suddenly her thumb was pressing on the screen. She heard a soft ringing. Her whole body tingled. She was nervous.

‘Hello?’

She had been holding her breath. Now she let it out with a startled squeak she immediately regretted, and then she hastily replied. ‘I’m Erin. From across the road.’

‘Hello, Erin. I’m Bridget. I saw your light on. I’ve been looking out for it, actually, these past couple of nights. The more I saw it, the more I was sure you couldn’t sleep, just like me. I didn’t want to be intrusive, giving you my number. I thought –’
‘Me, too!’ Erin said. It sounded too enthusiastic and she was embarrassed. She spoke more quietly. ‘I mean, I saw your light, too. I’d been feeling like…’

‘You’re the only person awake for miles.’ There was a rustling sound, as though Bridget was settling down.

‘Yes.’

Bridget laughed, but then she became serious. ‘You don’t mind, then? If we talk?’

‘No,’ Erin said. ‘Actually, I sort of hoped…I wanted to talk to someone.’

‘Good,’ said Bridget. ‘It gets lonely, doesn’t it? And there’s not a lot you can do to distract yourself when you’re so tired you can barely see.’

Bridget’s voice seemed to match the letters on the note. She spoke confidently – one word flowing into the next – as though their conversation was the most natural thing in the world. There was no awkwardness to her comments. She talked to Erin as though she had known her for years. As though she could tell Erin anything. Erin could not remember the last time someone spoke to her like this.

‘How long has this been going on?’ Bridget asked.

‘A few weeks. I don’t really know.’

‘And have you ever struggled to sleep before?’

‘No,’ Erin said. ‘That’s what bothers me. I’ve always been able to sleep. It just started…just like that.’

‘So it isn’t a passing thing,’ she said. ‘And it’s not medical?’

‘I don’t think so. I haven’t been to the doctor. I tried. But I couldn’t do it. Should I go?’

‘There’s not a lot they’d do. And I don’t recommend sleeping pills. They’ll give you an incredible hangover.’
Erin was about to respond, but could not suppress a yawn.

‘Are you ready for bed?’ Bridget asked.

‘Yes,’ Erin replied. ‘I was in bed when you posted the note.’

Bridget gasped as though she had been stung. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. Did I wake you up?’

‘No, I was just lying there. You know.’

‘I do,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you try lying down now? While we’re talking?’

Erin got back into bed. She had shoved the duvet back when she had heard the crash of the letterbox, and now it was cold when she pulled it over her. Bridget waited while Erin got settled again. Erin put her phone next to her pillow and lay on her side so the tip of her nose almost touched the screen. Bridget’s voice was more distant now, but Erin could still hear it.

‘Better?’ Bridget asked.

Erin made a soft sound in agreement. She heard something rattle on the other end of the phone – a chair, perhaps. The sound was followed by the same rustle she had heard earlier.

‘What do you do, Erin?’ Bridget asked. ‘Do you work?’

‘In the library. What about you?’

‘Oh, I work in the council. Public transport.’

Erin opened her mouth to tell her she had a feeling it was the council, but she managed to stop herself. Her muscles relaxed and she closed her eyes. Erin started to ask Bridget a question. She barely began before she forgot what she wanted to say. Bridget did not try to encourage her.
‘I think we’d better say goodnight,’ Bridget said. She sounded far away, and very quiet. It was almost as though Erin could feel what was being said more than she could hear the words. ‘It was nice to talk to you, Erin.’

Bridget’s voice faded. Erin felt warm and heavy. She felt safe.

The next morning, Erin woke up to the sound of rain against her window. She turned to the bedside table, but she could not see the usual thin black line of her phone. Then she remembered Bridget, and as Erin went through the conversation again she found her phone tucked underneath her pillow. It was half past seven. She thought she had slept for about six hours. That was good.

Pat was walking from the desk towards the stairs when Erin came in. She stopped when she saw her.

‘How are you feeling this morning?’ she asked.

Nicholas looked up from the computer keyboard. ‘Good to see you back. It’s not like you to be off sick.’

Erin’s neck, buried behind her thick scarf, prickled with heat that rose up to her cheeks. Pat turned back to Nicholas.

‘Should’ve seen her the other day,’ she said. ‘White as a sheet.’ She leant forward, squinting at her. ‘You look a bit better today. Have you managed to get some sleep?’

‘My wife has insomnia sometimes,’ said Nicholas. ‘Have you tried camomile tea? It’s supposed to help. My wife makes herself a cup when she can’t sleep.’

Erin hated listening to them. It was not just the attention that bothered her, but the way their voices sounded. It felt as though she was inside an aquarium tank. Their words reached her but they were muffled and odd. Everything was moving more
quickly than she was. More quickly than she could process. She could not focus. She did not like the way they were watching her, either. Eyebrows raised in concern. Expecting her to do something ill. She was not ill. She just needed to sleep.

‘The school rang,’ said Pat. ‘You know there’s that bug going around? It’s done a number on them. Only two of the teachers are in today, and most of the children are off sick. So they’ve cancelled coming in this afternoon.’

It did seem particularly quiet, Erin thought.

‘That’s a shame,’ she said, but she was secretly grateful she would not have to talk to children today.

In the afternoon, she was at the front desk. She heard the automatic doors open and she turned to look. The man – the one she kept seeing in her bedroom – came inside. As he walked past, he met Erin’s eye and winked. She tensed her shoulders in defence and watched him disappear around the corner.

She would not let him bother her. She would avoid him, he would leave, and she would not let him bother her. Why did he keep winking at her, though? It was as though he was edging closer to her every time she saw him. He was becoming more daring. He was trying to make some sort of connection.

Her skin prickled like it did when she saw ants crawling on the ground in summer. She ducked into the empty children’s room and nudged the door closed with her foot. She trembled and scratched her forearms, shaking the sensation out of her body. Beyond the door, she heard Nicholas say something; his voice sounded distant and hollow.

She was suddenly searching for something. She kept her eyes on the shelves and she slowly put the items she was holding down on the floor. It must be there somewhere, she thought. Somewhere. Unless someone had already taken it out. Erin
got closer to the shelves. Her eyes were having trouble picking out the titles. She found she was squinting, the letters furring into one another. She ran her finger along the rows and tried to follow where she pointed, but it was difficult when the books were all sorts of odd and irregular sizes. Smaller books were hidden between large, thin picture books. They had given up trying to order them a while ago. But she kept looking, and it was not until she had worked the entire room that she saw the book she wanted tucked in the low bookshelf underneath the window. It was a very distinct blue. That was how she found it.

She pulled it out. The book about whales. Erin looked out through the door, but no one was around. She closed the door half-way and carried the book to the sofa at the back. She sat down; the sofa was lower than she expected and she was startled slightly as she dropped onto it. Her knees were almost touching her chin. It felt ridiculous, so she shuffled around until she could lie flat, stretching her legs over the end. She opened the book, holding it like a canopy over her face. It was calming; the quiet and the dark and pale blues. Whales distorted in glossy peaks and troughs under the surface of the ocean. It felt like she was upside down, the way she was peering up into the sea. Perhaps the water would spill out onto her, she thought.

Her arms were getting tired. She knew what was about to happen, and in the back of her mind she hoped it would. That was really why she had sat there, why she had been so determined to find the book. She told herself she would only be for a minute, anyway. She just wanted a quick nap to prove to herself that she could still fall asleep, quickly and without thinking, like she did last night after she had spoken to Bridget. She thought she would probably wake up the next time the automatic doors opened. If someone walked in, she would know. But it was always so quiet. It was quiet now.
Pounding. Workers in yellow reflective jackets were smashing up the library with heavy sledge hammers. Erin woke up. The sound continued, but she realised it was much quieter. Fingers tapping on wood. She sat up and looked and Pat and Nicholas were looking back at her through the door. Pat was grinning. No, she thought. No. They both came into the room.

‘We weren’t sure whether to wake you, but we’re about to close up,’ Nicholas said. ‘No one’s come in for the last two hours.’

Two hours? What time was it? Erin could not tell under the fluorescent strip lights in there.

‘Aww, but you did look fast asleep,’ Pat cooed. ‘Do you feel better now?’

Pat looked at Erin, eyebrows raised while she waited for an answer.

‘I do, yes,’ Erin said. She did not, though. The adrenaline of being woken up made her feel less tired but she knew it was only temporary. It felt as though her head was stuffed with sawdust. Her mouth felt strange and dry.

‘You should’ve said if you needed a nap,’ Pat continued. ‘It’s no problem.’

‘Pat’s been showing me her holiday photos for the last hour,’ said Nicholas.

‘Well you weren’t exactly busy, either. Anyway, we’re closing up now. You should go home and get some sleep. You can take that out if you want.’

She was pointing at the book next to Erin. They both laughed. They were not being cruel, Erin knew. Erin would have found it funny, too, usually. But it was such an embarrassing situation that everything they said grated against her, offended her.

‘I think I’d better go,’ Erin agreed.

‘Have another sick day if you come down with the flu,’ said Nicholas. ‘Oh, and try camomile tea. I’ll ask my wife for some tips for you.’
‘That’s all right,’ Erin said. It was bad enough that Pat and Nicholas were fussing; she did not want it to go any further. Especially not with strangers. ‘I’m sure I’ll be fine after the weekend.’

When Erin got home, she found she could not relax. She could not focus on the things she usually did after work, so she just sat on the sofa for a while. Every few minutes, she glanced at the clock. It was a little before four. She felt a sense of dread: would she still be awake in twelve hours’ time?

She looked at the clock again. There was a very particular tingling somewhere between her lungs that she remembered from taking exams at school. She remembered them all, her classmates, standing outside the gym with their backs against the cold breezeblocks, trying to recite equations and watching the hands of the clock above the door move forwards. Feeling less and less prepared with every tick. Willing it to stop, because if it stopped then no one would open the double doors and they would not have to take the test at all. Was the night a test for her, now? She felt just as nervous. Just as unprepared. She did not want to go to bed and lie there, not sleeping. She did not want to be by herself.

Nicholas had been talking about camomile tea. Perhaps there really was something to it. Maybe she had just bought the wrong brand, or it had not been organic or strong enough. If she bought a more expensive box, then that might work. And if it worked, then she would not have to deal with everyone’s sympathetic glances next week. That would be the end of it. It was still early in the afternoon; she decided to go out to the health food shop in town.

An empty school bus went past the end of the street like a mouse scurrying into a bush when Erin stepped outside. She paused for a moment, thinking that she
should go back and come outside later when schoolchildren were not milling around
town, but she knew she would just be sat doing nothing in her living room, nursing a
growing sense of dread. Erin kept walking. She knew what she wanted and she would
only be a minute.

A few more cars flashed across the road ahead, and then a black car slowly
curved around the corner. It was Bridget. Erin’s heart was beating quickly and she
could not help staring. As Bridget sauntered past, she looked back at Erin. She smiled
in a flat-line sort of way, and then, with her thumb still hooked under the top of the
steering wheel, straightened her fingers in greeting. She had already gone past by the
time Erin thought to respond, so she continued walking. But she felt light. Bridget had
waved at her – in recognition. From one tired person to another.

Erin was usually still at work at this time, so she rarely saw Bridget’s car. She
heard a car door slam and dared to look behind her; the woman had a small bag over
her shoulder and a coat draped over her arm. She weaved between the front of her car
and the back of another, then opened the passenger door and lifted out two large,
canvas bags. Meanwhile, her husband opened the door, reaching out his arms to take
the shopping from her.
All the curtains in Bridget’s house were pulled together, except the ones in the room she stayed in at night. The light was on. Erin wondered if she had a name for it, that room, or if she went in there at all during the day. And she wondered what the husband thought when he went in, looking at that space that only his wife really knew. A few times that day, she thought about making her spare room into something similar. It was just a room full of junk and a spare bed Mum made her buy in case anyone wanted to come and stay. She thought she could clear it out. It was just big enough for a few more bits of furniture; perhaps a new table and one of those tall, thin lamps that would make it just bright enough in there. But as much as she was tempted by the idea, if she turned that space into a room like Bridget’s then it would mean she had resigned herself to the fact that she would never sleep normally again. And she could only see Bridget’s house from her bedroom window, anyway. She still wanted to see that light.

Erin had not been nervous about going to bed that next evening. In fact, she was almost excited to speak to Bridget again. They had not established how often they would talk, or when, or who would give the signal and call first.

Bridget sounded tired, but she did not slur or stumble over her words. It was as though she was at peace with her lack of sleep. Erin did not know whether she admired that, or whether it scared her. But Bridget seemed as though she wanted to help Erin, and that was important to her. Or, at least, talking to each other was a nice way to pass the night. Erin did not want to assume that Bridget would be in her window again tonight. She thought that if she looked forward to it too much, and Bridget was not there, then she would lie awake worrying that it was because of something she said. She went to bed without looking at the house. She left her curtains open, though, and she had switched her lamp on again.
There was less tension in her body tonight; she was not twitching or jerking as much. But she still could not fall asleep. Her thoughts were flitting like a fish from one image to another, half-finishing an idea and jumping into something else. She could not keep track, but she was trapped following the senseless chattering of her mind.

She went and stood in the patch of light by the window, waiting to see if Bridget was awake. The light in the opposite house was still on, but the window was empty. She must be in there. Perhaps she was waiting for Erin to notice her. Erin called her number.

‘Hello,’ Bridget said. ‘Were you asleep, before?’

‘No.’ She felt better already, as though she had just been given back her favourite blanket. ‘No, my brain wouldn’t shut up. Do you know what I mean?’

‘When you’re just snatching at bits of thought?’

‘Mm. Nothing makes sense but I just keep churning things...’

‘Over and over. That’s why I come in here,’ said Bridget. ‘I have to distract myself or find something very basic to think about. I need just enough stimulation to keep my thoughts in one place.’

‘What do you do?’ Erin asked.

‘Well, I’m often too tired to read properly. It’s supposed to help, so the newspapers say, but I can’t focus on the words in the first place. I have a few big photograph books I like to sit with. I’ve got all sorts: art, history, nature photography.’

Erin thought about the whale book, and how easily she had fallen asleep on that sofa. Maybe she should buy a copy.

‘But those get a bit boring after a while,’ Bridget continued. ‘I’ve tried everything. Thought I should use these hours to be productive. Learn a language or a
new hobby. Everything requires some concentration, though, and when you’re as tired as I am, it’s difficult to have that kind of mental capacity.’

‘How long have you had insomnia?’

‘Ooh, years.’ Bridget spent a moment thinking, going through all the sleepless nights in her head. ‘I’d say ten years, maybe. It comes and goes, though. Sometimes I’ll sleep perfectly for a month and I’ll think I’m finally better. And then it comes back, of course.’

Erin did not respond.

‘Not that you’ll be the same, Erin.’ Bridget sounded flustered and apologetic.

‘It’s different for everyone. Yours could be…I don’t know, you could be worrying about something. Or maybe your room is too hot or too cold. A few weeks of sleeping badly doesn’t mean you’ll never sleep again.’

Even though Erin knew Bridget was only saying these things to make her feel better, she liked the way she said them. They barely knew anything about each other, yet Bridget sounded genuinely concerned. Erin told her that she was sure she would be fine soon.

‘Yes,’ said Bridget. ‘You have to keep expecting to fall asleep. And one night, when I look out, I’ll see that it’s all dark in your house and I’ll know you’re back to normal.’

‘Thanks,’ Erin replied. ‘But in the meantime, is it all right if I –’

‘Keep talking? Like this? Yes, of course. There’s no one else to talk to, so it’s nice to have some company. I think I can hear you walking around – why don’t you get into bed and we can chat for a while.’

‘I was just stretching my legs,’ Erin said. ‘Sometimes it helps.’
She looked out onto the street. It was perfectly still outside. An orange-gold speck, possibly a moth, flitted under the light of the nearest lamp and caught her attention.

‘It feels strange,’ Erin muttered. ‘Suddenly I’m seeing hours of the day that didn’t really exist for me before.’

Bridget laughed softly. ‘Like you’ve been let in on a secret?’
‘Yes…no. No, it’s more like I’ve been shut out of something.’

‘No, this isn’t a privilege, is it?’ Bridget said. ‘It’s almost as though everyone you know has been invited to a party, and you take it for granted that you’ve been invited, too. But when you turn up, well, suddenly there’s a great big bodyguard outside the door pushing you away.’

Erin walked from the window and began to pace, keeping the phone to her ear but not saying anything. Bridget had sparked something. It started with a feeling, and then the feeling blossomed into scenes and sounds. She was remembering images she had not thought about in years.

‘Mum was headmistress of the local primary school,’ she said. ‘And she’d often have to stay late. Sometimes until five o’clock. I had to wait behind long after the bell so we could walk home together.’

‘Didn’t your brother walk you home?’

‘He’d started high school by then. And I think he went to the sports clubs most days.’

‘She wouldn’t let you go home by yourself?’

‘No. I don’t think she trusted me to be in the house on my own until Rhys got off the bus.’
Erin thought about the strange quiet that settled in the corridors once the other pupils had left. And she remembered how frightened she was of the cleaners, especially when she needed to walk down the newly-washed floors.

‘Sometimes, I used to pretend I was a ghost,’ she said.

Bridget laughed. ‘Was it that bad?’

‘No, but it felt odd. It’s like how it feels now. I’m in a place other people don’t usually go. I saw the classrooms when they were empty, and teachers were relaxed and talking to each other in a different way to how they spoke to us.’

‘Sounds like you wandered. Weren’t you with your mum?’

‘She wouldn’t let me in her office. She said I distracted her.’

Bridget huffed, but then she seemed to realise that she was being too loud in her house and her next words were quietly outraged, like a fierce whisper. ‘How ridiculous.’ She cleared her throat. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t mean to criticise her.’

‘It’s fine, really.’

But Erin thought about the way the white door of Mum’s office was always closed. Sometimes, if she dared to get close enough, she could hear Mum’s voice as she spoke on the phone. She remembered pressing her ear to the door one afternoon, and then Mum opened it. They had both been startled at the sight of each other, and Mum had sent Erin away to wait for her in the playground.

‘Anyway, she finally gave me my own house key when I was about nine or ten. Just suddenly gave it to me. I suppose she must have finally got sick of me hovering around after school had finished.’

She changed the subject, then, and described her old route home. Bridget did not interrupt; she just listened to Erin talk. Then the words began to get more and more difficult to form, and Erin let herself drift into sleep.
She woke up with a headache. When she got home from work, she could not stand the pain any longer. She went to the kitchen to take a paracetamol tablet. After reaching into the cupboard for a cup, she pulled her arm back too quickly and knocked a thin wine glass. It clinked loudly, almost in warning, and tumbled down onto the countertop. Erin tried to grab it without thinking, but again she was too slow to react and the glass smashed. It seemed to burst. Shards poured off the counter and landed on her bare feet.

Pain tore at her left foot. She closed her eyes tightly for a few seconds, feeling the cut like a shrieking alarm but not wanting to see how bad it was, and not wanting to deal with the mess she knew surrounded her.

She felt light headed, and realised she had been holding her breath. She gasped for air, opening her eyes at the same time.

There was glass everywhere. It had been a large glass, but still she could not believe that all these fragments had fitted together – there seemed to be far too much of it. There was glass in the sink and on the windowsill; it had skittered along the floor and she could see a large piece near the oven to the far left of her. Where her work trousers were bunched up around her ankles, tiny fragments of glass had settled in the fabric like snow. And there was blood. The cut was near her little toe, on the side of her foot, and while it did not look too bad, the blood had already trickled down onto the floor. She could feel it warm and wet between her toes.

She did not know what to do first. If she moved, she would leave bloody footprints dotting the kitchen floor. She could not walk up the carpeted stairs to the bathroom. Turning her torso, she looked around her. She was afraid of stepping on a shard of glass and making the situation worse.
She was so tired, and now she had hurt herself. No one was coming to help her, to scoop her up and away from the glass or to calm her while they treated the cut on her foot. She wanted her Dad. She wanted Bridget. She just wanted someone to make her feel safe and then maybe she could finally sleep through the night and stop doing stupid things like this.

But that would not happen no matter how long she waited. The wound was throbbing, and she needed to clean it. She planned her steps; she could make it to the oven in two paces in order to grab the roll of paper towels on the side. Treading carefully, she made it across. It reminded her of the games she used to play in primary school, when the class pretended that the rough carpet was lava and only the big foam mats scattered around the room were safe to walk on. This was not a game, though. This was a dangerous consequence of her lack of sleep, and she had to deal with it by herself.

She walked over to the kitchen table, sat down, and pressed sheets of kitchen roll to her foot. The paper came away damp and red.

After a few minutes of applying pressure, the bleeding stopped enough for her to make it upstairs and bandage the cut. She went from the bathroom to her bedroom and lay down. Daylight was quickly fading. Spots of heavy rain clinked against the window. She was breathing heavily; her mind was focused on the dull ache in her foot. She closed her eyes.

The rain had stopped when she woke up again, but the room was dark. Her head felt too heavy for her neck; she sat up wincing and confused. What time was it? She was relieved to find it was only a little after six. Then she wondered for a moment about the bandage on her foot, and she remembered the pool of glass on the kitchen floor. And the red footprints she had made.
Still half-asleep, she saw flashes of beige carpet dotted with blood. Blood on her red gingham school dress. Blood drying in the ridges of her little hands. She felt the memory twist in her stomach like a wine cork.

She was five. She knew she was five because of the way the blood blotted the new bed sheets she had just been given for her birthday. Mum had brought home a stack of paper in a black bin sack and had given Erin and Rhys a crisp warning not to come near the living room until they were called. It was raining, and Erin was hungry and bored. She went upstairs to her room, picking up a heavy doll by its chewed foot. She lay flat on her back and lifted the doll above her. Its knotted hair dangled downwards. She stared into its face, daring it to move.

The doll was flying. Her room disappeared: replaced with an image of the doll floating in space, over rolling countryside, underwater. Erin felt an unfamiliar ache in her arms and an urge to send her arms and the doll crashing downwards. Her arms grew increasingly tired.

She let go.

She yelped and sat up, letting the doll tumble to the floor. She was just about to cry when a peculiar warmth rushed through her nose. Instinctively, she put her hand to the groove above her mouth. Her fingers were wet and red.

She gasped; blood bubbled across her lips, trickling down to her chin. She tried to catch the falling drops with her already stained hand. Blood seeped through her fingers.

There was blood on her new bed sheets. Big, dark drops the size of coins dotted the soft pinks and yellows of the pattern.
Erin panicked, choosing Mum over the bathroom. It made her wince to remember it now – would she even have this memory if she had simply hidden away in the bathroom until Dad had come home? But it was the first time she had experienced a nosebleed. She was only five; it shocked her deeply to see so much of her own blood.

By the time she made it downstairs, both hands were red and sticky. The doors to the living room and kitchen were shut.

‘Mum!’ A red bubble burst from her mouth and spattered on the carpet.

There was a clink of glass from inside the living room. ‘Upstairs,’ Mum drawled.

She had to fight the urge to call out to her again. Gingerly, she tried to nudge the door with her toe, but twitched when she felt her balance slip. Hot drops fell from her face onto her wrists, spilling down onto her gingham school dress.

‘Upstairs, Erin.’

Holding her left hand as tightly over her nose as she could, she reached up to the handle with her right. The door swung open and Erin ran into the room in a rush of panic. She suddenly wanted her mother to see her, frightened and upset, blood drying in her hair and browning like rust in the grooves between her fingers. She wanted to present herself as something horrifying, something that would finally make her mother look up from the paperwork.

The carpet turned cold and crinkly under her feet. Startled, she froze and looked down. Three drops fell in quick succession onto the paper scattered on the floor. There was paper everywhere.

She heard Mum swear. She backed away.
‘What’s the matter with you?’ Mum yelled. ‘Get in the bathroom. No, kitchen. Get in the kitchen.’

Erin ran to the kitchen. She stood by the counter and closed her eyes, flinching when she heard a furious jet of water hit the metal sink.

‘What a mess. What a stupid mess you’ve made. Move your hand. Move your hand.’

Her hands were tugged away from her face. A fresh stream of blood poured down to her chin. She heard a soft drip-drip as it hit the tiled floor.

‘For God’s sake,’ Mum muttered. ‘Hold this. Open your eyes and hold this. Press it to your nose.’

Erin looked at her mother’s flushed cheeks and the inky smudge of mascara underneath her eyes. She took the wad of cold kitchen roll and pressed it to her face. If she crossed her eyes, she could see it turning yellow, then red.

Mum called Rhys. There was no response, so she stormed upstairs. Erin stood, shaking, trying her hardest not to cry and make the situation worse.

‘It’s everywhere,’ Rhys said, coming down the stairs. ‘What did she do?’

‘Haven’t got that far, yet.’ Mum stayed in the doorway of the kitchen, pushing Rhys inside. She lifted her arm so her children could see the blood on the cuff of her white shirt. ‘I need to sort this. You stay with her. Tell her to keep that on her nose.’

Rhys was still for a moment. Then he took a few steps forward. ‘Can I…um. Can I get you anything?’

Erin shook her head.

They both flinched as Mum cried out in anger. She reappeared in the hallway clutching a piece of paper in her hand.
‘What am I supposed to do with this, Erin? Hmm? Why didn’t you look where you were going? Why didn’t you think about the mess you were making before you stood all over these reports? What am I supposed to say?’

The barrage of questions was too much. Erin’s shoulders shook violently; she was almost doubled over with the force of the tears that now mingled with the sticky blood on her face.

Rhys looked from his sister to his Mum. ‘You can just wash it off,’ he muttered.

‘Wash it off! How about this, instead.’

The children shuffled out of the way as Mum marched to the fridge. She took off a magnet – a chipped resin map of Cornwall – slapped the bloodied report to the door and pinned it there. Then she pulled the door open, took out a half-empty bottle of wine and disappeared back to the living room.

Erin wailed. Rhys shuffled awkwardly, stretched his hand to the fridge and drew it back again. He went to the sink and made a fresh compress, quickly switching it with the old one.

Dad came home soon afterwards. He seemed to sense that something was wrong as soon as he walked in; his greeting as he opened the door was wary. He hung his bag on the handrail of the stairs, and looked first at the spots of blood drying into the carpet, and then at the wide-eyed children in the kitchen beyond.

‘Is everything all right?’ he asked, tiptoeing closer. ‘Where’s Mum?’

‘Living room,’ said Rhys.

He crouched by Erin, and lifted her head in his hands. ‘That looks nasty. Has it stopped? Shall we look?’
Together, they slowly moved the kitchen roll away from her nose. He looked at it from all angles, frowning.

‘Don’t touch it,’ he said. ‘It should be fine if you don’t move too suddenly. We’ll wash your face, here.’

He turned, then froze. Erin whimpered. He cleared his throat, tried to relax, and did not say anything as he quickly took the report off the fridge. ‘Can you help your sister to the bathroom? I’ll be up in a second.’

The three of them walked together through the hall, and then Erin and Rhys went upstairs. The living room door opened softly and closed again. They tried to listen, but could not hear anything. Rhys nudged Erin’s arm, and they went up to the bathroom.

Back in her bedroom, her face tight with crying, she tried to take the sheets off her bed. There were blood spots like dull pennies across the duvet cover. But the duvet was heavy and much wider than the span of her arms, and she began to feel light-headed with the effort. She sat down on the floor with her back against the wooden edge of the bed frame.

Her door opened. She thought it would be Dad, but when she saw it was Mum, she felt her muscles tighten.

Mum closed the door softly behind her. ‘We’ll sort your bed after dinner.’

She came and sat next to Erin, groaning as her knees bent.

They did not say anything. Mum scratched at the red varnish on her thumbnail, letting tiny red flecks litter her trousers. She looked at Erin. Erin looked at the carpet. Then Mum playfully nudged her daughter’s arm with her shoulder.

‘You’ve got another clean dress in your wardrobe,’ Mum said. ‘Don’t worry. We’ll get a bit of salt water on it. It’ll be fine.’

Alice Vernon
Erin looked at her, and then her eyes flicked downwards to a patch of pale red – not blood – in the middle of Mum’s shirt. Mum followed her eyes and saw the stain.

‘Go away,’ Erin said.

‘Erin, I didn’t mean to…I’m…I’m just very busy at the moment.’ She got up. Her hand fluttered nervously around her collar. ‘Dad’s making dinner. Do you want to see if he needs any help?’

Erin shook her head.

Mum hesitated by the door for a moment, and then left.

The memory seemed to bring the pain back, and Erin rubbed at the bridge of her nose. She wondered if Mum ever thought about that evening. She wondered if Mum felt bad, if she even remembered the way she had slapped that paper against the fridge. Perhaps that was why she called Erin without ever really saying anything; she wanted the contact but was scared of having an intimate conversation that might bring these bad days back. But Mum still drank, and she still had that fridge magnet.

‘You seem upset,’ Bridget said, as soon as Erin called.

Erin felt tears prickling her eyes. She blinked hard to clear them. ‘I broke a glass. I’m just so tired, I didn’t…’

‘Did you hurt yourself?’

‘My foot. I mean, it’s not bad. It was just where it fell. I didn’t stand –’

‘Erin, why didn’t you call me earlier?’

Bridget sounded stern, but her voice was also warm with concern. Erin’s shoulders bucked, and she started to cry.

‘Oh, sweetheart.

‘It was such a mess,’ Erin moaned.
‘That doesn’t matter, as long as you’re not hurt.’

‘I don’t even like those glasses. I never use them. Maybe it was a sign to get rid of them all. Mum bought them for me.’

‘Wine glasses?’

‘Yes. She clearly thought I needed twelve of them for all the sophisticated wine parties I have.’

Bridget laughed, and it made Erin feel better. ‘Well, someone’s going to miss out, now.’

‘I don’t even have twelve friends.’

‘Or any wine.’

‘I can’t believe I was so clumsy.’

‘It happens,’ Bridget said. ‘Being tired like this can really mess up your coordination, I’m afraid. But I’m glad you didn’t hurt yourself too badly. Did you clear up all the glass?’

‘I think so.’

‘Wear shoes in the kitchen for a few days until you’re sure. You might still spot a few pieces here and there.’

‘Yeah, I will.’

‘Does it still hurt? Your foot?’

‘A little bit.’

‘It’ll be all right in the morning. You have to forgive yourself; you’re tired.’

‘I feel all right now. It helps – talking.’

‘Good. Try going to sleep, Erin.’
‘…Erin.’

It was like the jolt of an elevator. Erin looked up from the open book she was working on.

‘You’ve stuck it upside-down,’ Pat said, pointing at the date label.

‘Oh, for – I’m sorry.’

Pat laughed. ‘It’s fine, Erin! I do it all the time. It doesn’t matter.’

It did matter; it mattered because she knew she had been talking to Pat, but she could not remember anything they had said. She did not even know the title of the book she had stuck the date label in. She closed the cover; there was a dark picture of a cabin in the woods with a bright red stiletto lying on the doorstep. She wrinkled her nose.

‘That looks bleak,’ Pat said.

‘I’ll go and shelve it.’

She put the thriller with a small stack of new novels and carried them over to a long table where, at the other end, someone was hidden behind a newspaper. While she bent over the books, sorting them in alphabetical order, she heard the paper rustle.

She could smell oranges.

‘And what have you brought me, my darling?’
Her head snapped up. He closed the newspaper and placed it neatly in front of him, carefully smoothing the front page. Erin’s hands were shaking. She gripped the book on top of the pile.

‘Is that a new book?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

He held out his hand. She wanted to throw it at him. Clenching her jaw, she walked around the side of the table and gave him the book.

‘Thank you kindly,’ he said, and winked. His voice made her stomach sputter.

She went back to the pile of books. She had to get away from him; her heart was beating unbearably fast and she felt a desperate need to wash her hands and face.

‘Interesting,’ he said, reading the back cover. He flipped the book over again and held it up. ‘Do you have shoes like that?’

Bile rushed up her throat and she swallowed hard to force it down again. Her mouth tasted bitter.

‘The little slip is upside down, look.’

‘I know.’

He made a tutting noise. ‘Did you do that?’

‘I’ll be back in a moment.’

She left the books where they were and walked as quickly as she could to the staff room. She bolted herself in the windowless toilet and turned on the cold tap. She clutched the edge of the sink for a moment, feeling her stomach boil, her throat clench in anticipation of vomiting. Sweat chilled on her forehead and down her back.

There was a knock on the door.

‘Erin?’ Pat called. ‘A man just told me you were looking a bit grey. Are you all right?’
She splashed cold water on her face. ‘Man. He…oranges –’ A wave of nausea made her close her mouth.

‘Which man? It was that old chap…’

‘Hate.’ She swallowed, and tried to get her thoughts to line up with her mouth. ‘I hate him.’

‘What was that? Are you sick?’

‘No. No, I just felt a bit queasy for a moment. I’m so tired. Is he still in the library?’

‘The man? No. He took out that thriller you just had, and went out.’

Her shoulders relaxed and her stomach softened. She turned off the tap and opened the door.

‘Good lord, Erin. You look terrible.’

‘He just…’

‘What?’

‘Never mind. I’m okay.’ She moved out of the cubicle, avoiding Pat’s worried gaze.

When she got back to the table, the man was gone. There still seemed to be a faint smell of oranges, though, so Erin picked up the books and moved them to the windowsill on the other side of the room.

That evening, Mum rang later than usual. It was just after nine, and Erin was already having trouble keeping her eyes open.

‘You’ll notice the television isn’t on,’ Mum said. Erin winced. ‘We can talk properly this time. That’s why I’ve called so late.’

Erin could not tell if she was being serious.
'So,’ Mum said. ‘Any news this week?’

‘Not really.’

‘Oh, well, I suppose…Have you heard from Rhys?’

‘Not since…’

‘Nasty business,’ Mum said, not letting Erin think. She had clearly told this story a few times, and that had proved the best phrase to start with. She was expecting a dramatic reaction.

‘What is?’

‘At Bryn Hen. Nasty business, Erin.’

Erin’s breath rattled in her throat. ‘What happened?’

‘First week as leader and everything. His new promotion, you know. Poor Rhys.’

‘Tell me what happened.’

She cleared her throat. ‘A teacher took a group up a very steep bank. Made of nothing but loose rocks, it was. What’s it called? You should know.’

Erin did know. She did. But what was it? The letters were? She had forgotten. She knew, and now it was gone. Gone. How had she forgotten something so simple?

‘Honestly, Erin, what was the point of your degree? Anyway, a boy slipped and broke his arm. The teacher wants to blame Rhys for allowing them to take that route in the first place. Ridiculous. I blame the teacher. No, I bet that boy was a little…gem. Probably mucking about. Brought it on himself.’

‘It’s probably not his fault,’ Erin said.

‘That’s what I told Rhys.’

‘I meant the boy.’ Mum did not reply. ‘It’s not the boy’s fault.’

‘Were you there?’
‘What?’

‘How do you know the boy wasn’t being stupid if you weren’t there?’

‘Well…’

Mum made a satisfied grunt. ‘Anyway, we’ll just have to see what happens. Accidents are part of the job, I suppose. I’m sure Rhys will be able to sort it out. You should give him a ring, though. Offer some sisterly support.’

‘Will do,’ Erin said.

‘Promise?’

‘Yep.’

Erin listened to her mother talk for another half an hour, and then she could not stop herself from yawning. They ended the call soon afterwards.

She did not call her brother – she had never intended to call him – but the thought of him lingered at the front of her mind for the rest of the evening.

Bryn Hen, the camp where Rhys worked, had been the favourite location for her primary school’s annual trip. From the age of seven, the school’s children would stay for two nights, cut off from the world in a rural part of north-west Wales. Because the camp was so small, each year group would take it in turns to stay over during a fortnight slot in February. Erin went once when she was seven and refused to go again, largely because Sarah had moved schools, but Rhys had gone every year. Each time, he would come back with some new hobby – rock climbing or kayaking or building campsites on the lawn out of gardening canes and old bed sheets. And now he worked for the camp, leading groups of schoolchildren through all sorts of dangerous activities.

Erin called Bridget as soon as she got into bed.
‘It’s a bit early, isn’t it?’ Bridget said. It was half past ten.

‘I know, I just…had some things I wanted to think about,’ Erin said. ‘I wanted to talk to you. Is that okay?’

‘Of course. You know it is. I came upstairs a few minutes ago – did you see the light come on?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I had a feeling you’d be in the room, though.’

Bridget laughed. ‘Well, I saw your living room go dark, so I thought I’d come upstairs. Just in case.’

That made Erin feel better. She had thought Bridget would not pick up, or that she would be angry at her for calling so early. Erin had not even made an attempt to go to sleep.

‘Is something the matter?’ she asked. Erin heard rustling through the phone; Bridget was settling down.

‘I had a bad a day. That man –’

‘At the library?’

She took her time to form the words she had not been able to say to Pat. ‘He likes making me uncomfortable, I think.’

‘He thinks it’s a game.’

‘Yes. I shouted at him a few weeks ago. He was in the children’s section, and I told him to get out. And now…’

‘He’s just trying to push your buttons,’ Bridget said quietly.

‘It’s more than that, though. I keep…stuck…I’m getting –’

‘When you fall asleep?’

‘When I eventually fall asleep, sometimes it’s like I’m stuck between being awake and dreaming, and I see him. And I can…I can feel him.’

Alice Vernon
Bridget paused. ‘Is it definitely him?’

She remembered seeing his face leering from the corner of her room, but she also felt again the smooth chin and lips on her cheek.

‘Are you sure?’

‘It’s him,’ Erin said, but the words sounded flat.

‘Or is he someone else? Is something taking his shape?’ Bridget’s voice was getting louder. ‘Does he remind you of—’

‘And then my mum called.’

Bridget was soft again. ‘I take it that’s a bad thing?’

Erin smiled, and relaxed her shoulders. ‘No. I mean – she’s my mum, Bridget. It’s just…’

Bridget waited. But Erin did not finish her sentence.

‘Don’t you get on?’

‘We do. We do get on, mostly. Well, we don’t really see each other very often, and when she calls…’

Bridget’s breathing was slow and patient. Her voice was quiet. ‘You can tell me.’

‘Our conversations are so trivial. She never asks too much. It’s all very…on the surface. Or it’s just about my brother Rhys. I don’t know. Recently, it feels like she doesn’t want to know too much about what’s happening in my life.’

Bridget did not respond for a moment and Erin started to think that she had said too much. Perhaps parent troubles were not something Bridget was willing to talk about. But then she asked, ‘Recently?’

The word surprised Erin, but then she realised that she was the one who had said it first. ‘Recently,’ she echoed. ‘Since I moved out. Became independent.’
Erin began to feel uncomfortable. She did not think she should have shared the problems she had with her mother – it was too complicated. There was too much of her personal history behind it. Bridget had barely told Erin anything about herself, and now Erin was opening up about something she had never discussed with anyone. She felt hot. Her legs started to tingle. She sighed, sat up and threw the duvet away from her.

‘My brother…’

‘He’s in trouble, isn’t he?’ Bridget asked. ‘I read about what happened.’

‘Yes. I feel sorry for him – of course I feel sorry for him – but the whole thing is making me –’

‘Is it the camp?’

‘Bryn Hen? Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t really speak to Rhys any more so perhaps I just feel guilty that I can’t offer him the support that Mum thinks I should. But I don’t know…that camp…’

She briefly pictured the gathering of buildings in a clearing – a big green hut and smaller dormitory buildings. Usually, she could not bring to mind anything more than that. Now, however, she was thinking about Bryn Hen. Really thinking about it. And all sorts of images were coming back to her; an algae-spotted kayak propped against a shed, the way her friend Sarah had battled with her glasses against the chin strap of her hard hat. Erin did not know she still had these memories, but something Mum had said must have brought it all back tonight. The memories were vivid, too, as though they had been sealed up and preserved. She closed her eyes.

They passed tree trunks muffled in ivy. Erin remembered the way the road twisted; a constant pull on her little body from right to left and back again. Where there was a
particularly sharp bend, she would spot bouquets of brown flowers tied to a broken fence. Sometimes the road would dip, the car would slow down, and a rush of water would arc away from the tyres.

She was sitting in the back seat. Trying not to cry. Feeling every yard separating her from home tightening in her chest like a coil. Next to her was a bag she could barely carry – a grubby white holdall with ‘Property of…RHYS!’ scrawled beneath the front zip in thick black marker pen. That bag was embarrassing, and part of the reason for her growing sense of doom. Her friends would have their own bags, Erin knew. Bought for the trip. And she would turn up with her brother’s old football kit bag that smelled of sweat and fruit juice and still had bits of mud stuck to the inside. Erin licked her thumb and rubbed at his name, but it would not budge. She looked at her hand – there was no ink on her skin. The black letters were permanent; there was nothing she could do.

At each bend in the road, Dad’s wet shoes creaked like grinding gears against the pedals. It was a noise she hated anyway, but that morning it seemed to agitate her even more. Erin did not want to cover her ears and draw attention to herself, because Dad would say it was not his fault and then he would reassure her that they would be there soon. She did not want him to say that, so she tucked her head down into her shoulders, squashing her neck until it hurt. It did not make a lot of difference to the sound.

The woods eventually fell away to open land covered with rough heather. The climb had been gradual and Erin had not noticed how high they were. Now she could see for miles – the hills lapped over each other and melted away into the distance and the low clouds. They turned a wide bend and the land on her side of the road narrowed until she was looking out over an entire valley. Then the car slowed
suddenly; they waited as a group of sheep tottered across the road and up the bank to the left of them. Her parents laughed, mocking the animals in silly voices. But she could not take her eyes away from her window. She could see everything. She could see a thread of smoke from a tiny, isolated farm cottage, and a blue tractor rumbling slowly through a field. More than that, though, she could see all the wrinkles in the land. Deep scars now furrowed with trees. Round dents like basins in the hillside.

‘Did meteors make those?’ Erin asked, as Dad simultaneously pressed the horn to hurry the last lingering sheep.

‘Finally,’ he muttered, and the car sped up again. ‘What was that you said?’

‘Those holes in the hill,’ she said. ‘Did meteors make them?’

‘Ice,’ he said. Then he noticed she had stopped moping, and saw his chance to keep her distracted. ‘A long, long, long time ago, all of this was covered in ice, and it carved out these hills. Amazing, isn’t it?’

‘A lot of ice,’ she breathed.

Her parents chuckled, and Mum turned around in her seat. She seemed horrible then, and Erin knew her fear had distorted the memory because she could only picture Mum’s face as incredibly sharp, as though she were made of bits of jagged metal.

‘Almost there,’ Mum said, grinning.

Erin slithered down in her seat as a wave of fresh misery made her eyes water. Dad said she would be back before she knew it, but it did not make her feel any better.

Ten minutes later, Mum pointed to an oncoming turn in the road. Erin’s heart started to beat very quickly.

They passed through a scattering of cottages with crumbling window frames and into another patch of trees. A wooden tower draped with thick rope ladders stood
out between the trunks. Gathered around its base was a group of children with red
hard-hats on their heads, listening to a bald man with his hands on his hips. One of the
children craned his head as far back as possible to see the top of the tower and Erin
and her parents watched as his helmet slid off and hit the back of his neck.

‘Oh good grief,’ Mum muttered.

The trees surrounded a wide, dusty clearing filled with long huts. Cars were
parked untidily, with parents and children milling around in between.

‘See anyone you know?’ Mum asked. ‘Look, Sarah’s over there. You like
Sarah. Stick with each other. You’ll be fine.’

Erin slithered out of the car and Dad carried the bag over to the bench where
Sarah was sitting by herself.

‘Howdy there, Sarah,’ Dad said. ‘Did we miss your parents?’

She waved, but did not look up, and returned her hand to her lap with a heavy
and deliberate thud. Erin’s parents looked at each other. Erin went and sat next to her,
and they swung their legs in synchronisation. Judging. Sarah’s left foot brushed the
top of her camping rucksack with a dry hiss every time it passed.

‘Right. Well. You two have fun,’ said Dad. ‘And…you know…if it’s really
bad…’

Dad showed an opening and Erin took the opportunity to blame him.

‘But you’ve paid for the trip,’ she said.

‘She’ll be fine,’ said Mum. ‘Won’t you? You’ll be fine.’

Dad dropped the bag at her feet, and then put his hand on her head. ‘Wear
your helmet properly. Both of you. Don’t do anything you don’t think you’re capable
of. Listen to your teachers.’
Her parents hugged her and Erin tried to stay as rigid as possible even though she felt like she was dissolving from the inside. She watched them get into the car, and then they were gone.

‘There’s, um…I found something cool,’ Sarah said. Her voice was barely audible. She pointed to the biggest cabin in the centre of the clearing. ‘Over there.’

They left their bags at the bench and walked over. Most of the cars had left now, and some of the boys had found a football and were kicking it to each other and missing. Sarah and Erin weaved around them from a distance, scared of being hit. Sarah led her to the side of the building where weeds were growing up. Furry cigarette ends dotted the grass around their feet.

They stood side by side in front of a notice board display case. The long huts behind them were made of porous bricks, built as an extension to the site. At some point, then, this big building had stood alone, and the notice board Sarah was pointing at would have been clearly visible. Now it was hidden in the shadow of the other buildings.

‘Look in it,’ Sarah urged.

Erin looked. The glass was still intact, but the wooden frame was rotting and patchy with old paint. Condensation had fogged up the left corner of the glass, and thick white discs, like flying saucers, clung to the wood inside. Erin had seen lots of different fungi at home, but always growing where you would expect. Grey stumps sticking out of the grass, or edging out against the bark of trees. Not inside something someone had made.

‘Yuck,’ she said. ‘What’s round the back of the hut?’

‘I haven’t been. Do you want to have a look?’
They trod carefully down the passage and into the thick growth of grass and weeds behind the building. Erin’s shoe crunched fragments of glass. There was a beer bottle lying on the ground, with a dead wasp curled up inside it.

Propped up against the wall was a metal chair with a green puddle of rainwater on the seat.

‘Dare you to sit on it,’ Sarah said.

‘Dare you to drink it.’

They laughed. There was a sudden sound of rushing water – a toilet flushing. Erin looked up. High above the chair was an open window.

‘Throw something in,’ Erin said. ‘Or pretend you’re a ghost.’

‘I can’t reach.’

‘Stand on the chair.’

‘I still wouldn’t reach. You’re taller than me, you stand on the chair.’

They heard a register being called. Sarah ran back out into the clearing, and Erin hurried after her.

A group was forming outside the main hut and they went to join them. Their teacher, Mr Davies, was standing with Miss Baxter and the scruffy Mr Parker. They were wearing casual clothes – trainers and faded t-shirts – and it was strange to see them like that. Mr Davies, taking the lead, stood with hands on his hips and his chest puffed out like a robin. He squinted up at the overcast sky and took long, exaggerated breaths.

‘Good to see you’ve all made it,’ he said. He rubbed his hands together. ‘We’ve got a lot to do before this evening, so let’s get going. Follow me.’

He charged through them and they parted like sheep before trailing after him and Miss Baxter. Mr Parker shuffled along at the back, kicking loose stones that shot
up their messy line and occasionally flicked the back of someone’s leg. They walked past a row of garden sheds with canoes patched up with silver tape propped up against them. On one of the sheds was a little plastic square, white on one diagonal half and orange on the other. In the white corner were the letters ‘BZ’. Sarah began repeating it under her breath.

‘I’m looking for them before we go orienteering,’ she explained, even though Erin had not asked. Sarah’s eyes were darting from each shed to tree trunk. ‘No one else will think to spot them now, but I’ll remember where they all are and I won’t finish last. BZ by the shed. It rhymes. Tell me if you see any more.’

They came out onto a thin lane dotted with wide, beige puddles. A large barn stood alone. There was nothing but fields around them. Mr Davies held up his hands towards it as though the children should be impressed, but in his excitement he had forgotten to tell the group where they were going.

‘What do you think is in there?’ Sarah whispered. She seemed particularly on edge as they walked closer to the barn.

Erin was thinking of the books Rhys got for Christmas. They all seemed to have haunted buildings glowing green through the windows on the cover. He used to leave them on display on the living room sofa to scare her.

The group stopped in front of the double doors and waited while Mr Davies knocked. No one answered. He went around the barn, came back and knocked again. He was about to knock a third time, but one of the doors suddenly opened and a young man walked out. His dark eyes flitted over the children as he did a quick count. He ran his hand through his hair and vigorously rubbed his forehead.

‘Come on, then.’
The barn seemed even bigger as they gathered inside. The man weaved through the group to a corner where a cable was knotted to the wall. He untangled it and began to work it through his hands. The children peered up at the beams of the far-away roof, and watched as a wooden rack draped with black wetsuits slowly descended.

‘Mind your heads,’ he called over the echoing squeak of the pulley.

They scattered. The frame stopped a metre from the floor. Erin could smell something she had not encountered before. It was damp and pond-like; a sour, green smell of old rubber and sweat.

The man grabbed a dangling arm. ‘They’re still not quite dry from the last lot we had here, but you don’t need them today, do you?’

‘No, no,’ said Mr Davies. ‘Just getting ourselves sorted. That’s all to come tomorrow.’

Miss Baxter helped the girls find a wetsuit to fit them, while Mr Parker did the same for the boys. They were odd sizes, though, and when it was Erin’s turn Miss Baxter held up a suit to her neck that trailed to the floor. She pinned it to Erin’s shoulders, looked down at her arms and legs. But Erin was the last one, and the only wetsuits left had holes in them. Miss Baxter said it would be fine. She left Erin to hold it, heavy and stinking, while the children queued for thick wellies, anoraks and hard hats.

The walk back to the main site was difficult. Mr Davies marched on ahead, loudly teasing the members of his beloved football team who clustered in a group behind him. Then a rift formed between them and the rest of the class – the less athletic ones who were struggling under the awkward bulk of the rented gear. Sarah had been given an anorak that was much too large; she carried it over her arm and one
of its sleeves brushed the ground as she walked. She had accidentally caught it with her foot a couple of times, but with the heavy wellies in her other hand she could not reposition the coat. Erin was a few inches taller and managed to keep everything off the ground. She felt sorry for Sarah, but she had to be careful not to drop anything herself.

The two of them had fallen to the back of the line by the time they made it to the sheds. Sarah’s anorak was in danger of slipping off her arm entirely, and she was beginning to get frustrated.

‘Sir,’ Erin said. Mr Parker grunted. ‘Can we stop for a second? Sarah’s coat…’

He shook his head, then reached a hairy hand between the girls and lifted the trailing coat from Sarah’s arms. They kept walking, and a few minutes later Erin felt a tap on her arm, and he lifted her coat up as well. He folded both coats under his arm.

‘Better?’ he asked.

Sarah nodded, face blushing red, and Erin thanked him for the both of them.

The class had disappeared by the time they reached the main site. Miss Baxter was leaning against the wall by the door of the big building. She gestured inside with her thumb when they approached. Erin could hear everyone’s voices.

Mr Parker talked with Miss Baxter while Sarah and Erin went inside. It was dark and cold, and the air was thick with the damp pondweed smell. Her class was bustling around the walls, trying to find an empty peg that had not been snapped off. Sarah walked to a dark corner where there were a few spaces free, and Erin followed. She dumped her wellies on the wooden bench next to Sarah’s and hung up her wetsuit, anorak and helmet. Her arms trembled and felt uncomfortably light.
Mr Davies clapped his hands. ‘Next! Beds! How many of you have made your own bed before, hmm? Miss Baxter has the dormitory list – go outside and she’ll get you organised.’

The bags were where they had left them by the bench. Erin’s arms still ached and she half-dragged her holdall across the ground, covering the bottom with streaks of dirt and grass. She was sent to the building on the right of the main block, and into the first room on the left. Sarah came in a few minutes afterwards, along with three other girls.

‘Erin, can I have the top?’ asked Sarah. She rubbed her arm to show she was still suffering from the walk and therefore deserved the top bunk.

Erin looked up at the bed. The wooden railings were low and she had a vision of herself falling off in the night. It would serve her parents right if she did. She was still wary of it, though, so she nodded and watched Sarah happily clamber up the ladder.

‘Oh.’

‘What?’ Erin asked.

‘Look.’

Sarah was pointing to one of the wooden bars, just where it would be level with her head when she slept. Erin held one of the rungs in the ladder, but it wobbled in her hand.

‘What is it?’

‘It says “The Grey Lady will visit you tonight. Beware.” They’ve spelled “beware” wrong.’

One of the other girls, Molly, clambered down from her bunk bed in the corner of the room. The other two gingerly followed.
‘Where? Let’s see,’ Molly said, and climbed the ladder to where Sarah was sitting. She looked, and then she gasped. ‘My cousin said a boy from her class disappeared when they came here. Maybe this was his bed!’

‘My brother, too! My brother said it happened to a girl from his class!’ squealed one of the others.

Rhys had also told Erin about the Grey Lady. As soon as Mum had found the form, crumpled and neglected, in the bottom of her school bag, he had told her. Told her about how the Grey Lady was married to a man who had helped build the camp, but he was lazy and did not put his tools away properly, and she had tripped over a hammer, hit her head on a rock, and died. And now she haunted the buildings punishing the children who stayed there, because it was for them that Bryn Hen was made in the first place.

He even said he had seen her. When Erin was packing he came into her room, which he never did, and sat on her bed. His face was serious. He must have been practising that expression in his room beforehand. He said he had looked out of the window at Bryn Hen in the middle of the night and saw the ghost floating in wide, lazy circles around the clearing. There was a hole in her head that steamed like the top of a fresh mug of tea. Then she had disappeared into the building where the girls were sleeping. Rhys heard a scream, and in the morning there was an empty seat at the breakfast table. The teachers told them not to tell anyone, but he wanted his little sister to be prepared. Someone would not come back, he said. Erin asked why the school kept going there if pupils disappeared every year, and then he got angry and said she was making fun of him. She would be sorry, he said. Erin told him he was stupid, but the story gave her a sickly feeling.
The girls were sharing horror stories, their voices getting louder and louder as they worked themselves up. They instantly fell quiet when Mr Davies walked in.

‘What’s all this noise?’

‘Sarah’s got a message on her bed about the Grey Lady, sir,’ said Molly. ‘And she’s really scared and now we’re scared, too.’

Sarah scrunched up her face at Molly as Mr Davies went over to their bed and peered over the top bunk. He squinted where Sarah pointed. ‘Rubbish. Some daft pupil from a bad school has done that. We’re a good school, and we know better than to believe nonsense like this, don’t we?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So don’t be ridiculous, Sarah. All of you. The boys have already made their beds. They’re ready and waiting for you. Hurry up.’
Chapter 6

Erin shivered and opened her eyes. She saw her ceiling, and the way the night’s shadows swept across it – a familiar sight to her now. Propping herself up on one elbow, she reached over and took a sip of water.

She got out of bed, and took the few steps to her window. The blinds in Bridget’s window had been pulled across, but left open so that they looked like thin bars. Erin leant against the wall and looked out. She saw a cat scurry across the road and up along the street. She watched the blinking white and red lights of an aeroplane shift slowly among the few stars, and when it had disappeared she went back to bed.

When she closed her eyes, images of the camp still flitted in her mind. She did not want to think about it any more. She reached for her phone.

‘I saw you stargazing,’ Bridget said.

‘Did you? I didn’t see you.’

‘I was peeking.’ She laughed. ‘See anything good?’

‘An aeroplane.’

‘It’s a hobby of mine, actually. Well, perhaps “hobby” is a strong word.’

‘Astronomy?’
‘Yeah. Only recently, though. I bought a book and sometimes, if my brain works, I do this online course. Just the basic stuff. Maybe you should try it.’

‘Do you have a telescope?’

‘No,’ Bridget said. ‘It’s just something to do at night – I don’t want to invest too much in it. But it’s nice, you know. To know the constellations. It sounds silly, but they’re like friends, in a way.’

‘Except when it’s cloudy.’

‘Except when it’s cloudy, yes. But now I have you to talk to.’

Erin did not say anything for a moment. She could still see the dormitory in her mind.

‘You’ve remembered something,’ Bridget said.

‘Yes.’

‘Is it to do with whatever’s keeping you awake?’

Erin thought about it. ‘I don’t know. I don’t know what it is. I just remembered the camp we went to at school, that’s all. People keep talking about it.’

‘I see. You don’t want to talk about it?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘But thank you.’

The following night, a heavy thud pulled Erin from the edge of sleep.

She opened her eyes. Her heart was beating heavily. The thud came again, followed by laughter, and then a squeal came high and thick through the wall behind her head. Silence. Several bangs in quick succession. Erin leant on her elbows, tugging at a crease in the mattress cover, and she listened.

She did not know much about the family next door, even though they had been her neighbours since she moved there. She only seemed to catch them in sounds or
smells. The boys shutting the door on their way to school. And their fire. Each house on Erin’s street had small, paved back yards with wooden gates leading to the alley. You could not do much with the space – it was a challenge even to fit all the wheelie bins in there. But two summers ago, the family next door bought an outdoor fire. The walls dividing each yard were low, and all the residents had added wooden fences to separate themselves, but whenever she heard the dad clinking a box of beer bottles on the table, she knew he was about to light the fire and she would have to bring her washing in. There was so much smoke, and it lingered for ages. Every summer smelled burnt. Erin had to keep her windows shut, so she had bought an electric fan for every room and she would run those instead. But the smoke still seeped in through the back door keyhole and she felt like a bee trapped and slowly collapsing under the fumes.

The two boys were arguing. Erin had heard noises through the walls before. She could usually hear things from both sides, but only intermittent sounds like a vacuum cleaner or the distant trill of a telephone. This was different. It seemed particularly loud this time. And it was late, too; it was nearly half eleven. Erin lay back, pulling the duvet over her head and letting out a muffled groan. She heard what sounded like something crashing down onto a bed, and then laughter. She made another noise, but she knew it would not travel through the bricks and wallpaper – she could not raise her voice enough. She decided just to wait. Wait for them to stop. They would go to bed soon, she thought.

She kept her eyes open and she listened. She put her ear against the wall, and it was cold against her cheek. She could hear her own insides, the rush and rhythm of her heart, more than she could hear the boys. It was like holding a shell to her ear, but this was less open and hollow, and interrupted with other sounds. Muffled and
unpredictable sounds. Erin wanted it to stop but at the same time she held her breath so she would not miss anything. She thought they were throwing a ball at each other.

She needed advice. She got out of bed and padded over to the window, brushing a curtain aside. Bridget’s light was still on. She smiled. Bridget would help her.

She got back under the duvet, lighting up the covers with her phone.

‘Thought you’d gone to bed,’ Bridget said, picking up after the first ring.

‘I tried.’

‘Still no luck?’

‘My neighbours are –’

‘Being loud? Which side?’ Bridget asked. Erin heard a shuffle of paper, and then footsteps.

‘Right. My right. Your left.’

Bridget laughed. ‘I see them. The lights are all on. I’m sure they’ll go to bed soon.’

‘It’s really loud, though.’

‘An argument?’

“No, the boys. I thought they’d have stopped by now, but they haven’t. And then I started to think they’d never stop and that I was in Hell and I’d spend eternity listening to them nattering and throwing things and I’d never sleep again.’

‘I don’t think you’re in Hell,’ Bridget said. ‘Even boys get tired.’

Erin’s phone was cold and quiet against her ear. Behind her head, one of the boys started to yell in a crescendo of noise, getting higher and higher. A deeper voice joined in, but louder and angry and further away. Erin held the phone up to the wall.

‘I see what you mean,’ said Bridget.
‘I think the dad’s there, now,’ Erin said. They paused to listen. The man’s rumbling barks suddenly stopped. The room next door was still for a moment, but then the banging began again. Quiet and testing at first, but when the dad did not come back the chaos continued.

‘Are your neighbours the same?’

‘No,’ said Bridget. Erin heard the sigh of a chair cushion, and a slight huff of breath as she tucked herself into it. ‘No, they’re fairly quiet on my side. Although you know the old lad next door? There’s always an ambulance outside?’

Erin remembered several occasions when she had watched the paramedics struggle to squeeze the ambulance down the narrow street. It seemed to happen every few weeks. They would take away the elderly man on a stretcher, his wife locking the door behind her, and a couple of days later a younger man – presumably their son – would bring him back in his car. Sometimes she could see the lights of the ambulance reflected along the street before she turned the corner on the way from work. It brought everyone to their windows, either morbidly entertained by the driver’s efforts or worried about the state of their car parked against the pavement.

‘He has a lung condition, the poor man,’ Bridget explained. ‘Anyway, whenever he gets bad, he has to be hooked up to some sort of machine for a little while. He has it in the bedroom that joins with our house, and it hums like a…well, it’s like sticking your head in a wasp’s nest. No idea how his wife copes. It makes just about every house along this street vibrate, and we get it particularly badly for being so close.’

A crayon drawing of a man lying in bed suddenly, vividly, came into Erin’s mind. Three strands of thick grey hair were coming from his head in waxy lines. Next to him, a big box emitted angry black zigzags. She saw it in all its colours, but she
knew it was not something she had ever drawn. It took her a moment to place it. First the hands, holding it up, then the red of his school jumper and a white yoghurt stain near the collar. She had forgotten his name, but she could see him. A boy from her class standing at the front by the whiteboard, pinching the corners of the paper, buzzing through his lips. Everyone clapped. Erin had drawn her grandma and her cat, but she stood in front of her class before him and had not thought to make a purring sound.

‘I remember someone at school,’ she said, covering her eyes with her hand to picture it more clearly. ‘His granddad was on one of those machines, too, I think. He drew a picture of it when we were told to talk about our grandparents. He even did the sound effects.’

Bridget laughed. ‘Trust a kid to bring out a sob story. I suppose it was gruesomely detailed?’

‘It was pretty simple, actually. But he would always hold the crayon in his fist, with his thumb furthest away from his drawing, the opposite to the rest of us. I mean, we weren’t *that* young. I think he thought we were the ones not doing it properly, and it’d be awful for the rest of his table when they had to share a box of crayons. He’d *crush* it into the paper. And when he’d finished, his picture would catch the light and the colours would crack and flake off in broken waxy bits. It was a mess.’

‘And you drew your Gran –’

‘Yes – my Gran, who was very much upright. In a nice floral dress. And her cat, too.’

‘Much better.’

‘I know.’
Erin turned towards her phone. She opened her mouth to tell Bridget she was okay now but something crashed against the other side of the wall. The boys’ laughter started again.

She groaned in what she had intended to be a fake sob, but she thought she might cry anyway. ‘Am I just being unreasonable?’

‘Why? Because it’s a Saturday night?’

‘They’re not usually like this,’ Erin said. ‘Any day of the week.’

‘Go round.’

‘No, no. It’s fine.’

‘Go over.’

The noises kept coming and she really thought they would have stopped by now. Even Bridget said they would stop. Erin was sure the boys would have gone quiet by midnight; it was well past twelve now and they were still being loud. She could not go round, though. She could not do that.

‘I really can’t,’ Erin said. ‘I don’t want to…’

‘Make it worse? How would you make it worse?’

She did not know how to answer. Excuses were bubbling in her mouth and she did not want to say any of them. All she could think of were the electric fans currently lifeless and tucked away in her broom closet, and she did not want to tell Bridget about them. She did not want Bridget to know about her compromises.

‘You can do it. Or I’ll do it,’ Bridget said.

‘How would that work?’ She felt guilty. She had not meant to say it like that. She picked up the phone again and sat up. ‘It’s just…they’d think it was weird if you went on my behalf.’

‘Do you know the family?’
‘Nope. I’ve seen them, but we’ve never spoken.’

‘Have they seen you?’

‘Well, no. I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘Then I’ll just say I live next door. They won’t know. It doesn’t matter who I am. Look, I’ll put my shoes on.’

Erin threw her duvet away from her. ‘Bridget, please. I’m up, I’m up. I’ll go. I’ll tell them to be quiet. I’m going.’

She passed the window, but Bridget was not standing there. She was probably bluffing about her shoes. Unless she was already half-way downstairs. Erin pulled the curtains shut and picked up a pair of jeans off the floor.

‘I’m dressed,’ she said. ‘But I bet they’ve stopped by the time I’ve knocked.’

‘Do you want me to come with you, then?’

‘No, it’s okay.’

‘Shall I watch?’

Erin laughed nervously. ‘No, I’d rather you didn’t. I’ll scream if I get attacked.’

They hung up. Erin looked back at the wall where the noise was coming from. She could still hear them. Perhaps going next door was not a good idea, but she had committed to it now and she did not want Bridget to think she was incapable of doing things by herself. She had to be assertive sometimes.

Erin walked downstairs and unlocked the front door. Night air rushed into the house and she zipped up the old fleece she had thrown over her shirt. Even if Erin could not see Bridget in the window, she knew she would still be watching. Hiding just out of sight, probably.
She would not rely on Bridget, though. She was an adult; she could take control of the situation. She would be aggressive. Maybe not aggressive. She would be firm. But at work she had been having difficulty speaking. She was so tired that words were no longer forming quickly, and sometimes they came out in a strange order or disappeared altogether. What if her neighbours opened the door, and she could not force herself to say anything?

*Please tell your children to be quiet,* she thought, collecting the words slowly. *Thank you. Good night.* See? Just like that. She just had to say it like that. She kept practising.

The living room light was on next door. A dim evening lamp, highlighted with the flickering blues and oranges of the television. There was a thin white drape covering the inside from view. Erin held her fist an inch away from a stained glass panel on the door. *Hello, I’m your neighbour. Please tell your children to be quiet.* *Telling. Children I’m your neighbour. Would you quiet mind telling.* Erin looked back at Bridget’s empty window for confidence, and then she knocked.

The television paused, making the blinds glow a fierce white. *Hello. Hello and neighbour. Telling your children I’m from next door and. Your children.*

A woman’s voice shouted, and then a man shouted back.

She could still run. She could run home. But then they might hear her door slam and come chasing after her. Her legs would not move, anyway. She should have asked Bridget to come with her, after all. She really needed someone with her.

A dark shape rippled in the glass in the door like a fish underwater. *Hello. Please tell.* It moved closer. *Please.* The door unlocked.

It was the man. The dad. He was staring at her, mouth slightly open, tongue on his bottom lip.
What had she been about to say? What would Bridget have said?

‘I’m really sorry. Hi. Your ch…I’m from…I’m from next door and I think I can hear your children and I was just wondering if you could tell…if…ask them to be a little quieter? Please?’

He frowned. ‘Oh, yeah, sorry. The sister-in-law’s staying over so we’ve put the kids in the same room. You know what boys are like.’

‘Well, if you could…could maybe tell them to be quiet, or just…’

Behind him, a woman yelled, ‘Who is it, Steve?’

‘Next door,’ he called back, not taking his eyes off Erin. ‘Tell the yobs to keep it down, would you?’

‘I really appreciate it,’ Erin said. ‘It’s…it’s difficult to sleep, so –’

‘Tell me about it,’ he said, his eyes widening. He suddenly became animated. A gust of wind pushed into the house and Erin could smell beer coming from him, now, and something like the inside of a burnt oven. ‘Had three mattresses since we’ve been here. When was that? Five years. I don’t know what I do, but I knacker them. Can feel every spring. I’m Steve, by the way. Nice to meet you.’

He held out his hand for her to shake.

A woman walked out of the living room and looked at her suspiciously. She went up the stairs and then Erin heard shouting. Almost screaming. Erin shook his hand and he was going on about his mattress history and she did not know what to do.

‘Kids’ve gone to bed,’ the woman said as she descended.

He stopped his explanation of memory foam mid-word, as though he had woken up from some kind of trance. ‘Right-o,’ he said. He looked back at Erin. ‘Sorry.’

‘That’s okay. Thanks.’
He shut the door. A few seconds later, the static colour from the television began to flicker and change again. Erin hurried back into her house. She could not believe she had just done that. Why had she done that? They were probably laughing about her, or complaining that she was stuck-up or something. And she was not like that, she was just tired. Was she a bad person, now? She should not have gone round. But she needed to sleep.

Standing in the dark living room, Erin tried to calm down but her body felt light as though she had just had a near miss with a car.

‘Did you get on all right?’ Bridget’s voice was less hushed than before. Her words seemed more defined and they came out quickly. ‘I didn’t watch because you didn’t want me to.’

Erin turned on the kitchen light and walked over to the fridge. ‘I spoke to the dad. Steve is his name.’ Erin pulled out a nearly-empty carton of apple juice, flicking the plastic tab open with her thumbnail. She found a clean glass from the cupboard.

‘Are you drinking?’ Bridget asked when the glass clinked against the wooden counter.

Erin knew she meant alcohol. ‘What? No. It’s juice.’

Bridget paused, listening to the liquid pouring. She made a noise that rose upwards, like an unanchored question mark.

‘I’ll post the empty carton through your door, if you want.’

‘I’ll believe you,’ Bridget said. ‘I was just concerned. I’d pop over if you weren’t coping, you know.’

Erin took a sip. ‘It’s juice,’ she said, closing the matter. ‘But thanks.’

She went upstairs and sat on her bed, still in her clothes, letting the glass in her hands become beaded with condensation. ‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘aren’t you tired?’
‘Are you?’

She was tired, but she was no longer sleepy. She knew now that there was a difference. She was trembling and annoyed with herself because of the way she had spoken to her neighbour. There were no sounds coming through the wall now, but Erin knew she could not sleep. There was only the ringing in her ears, and the conversation between her and the man next door playing over and over. A lingering tingle in her left hand.

‘Have you got yourself worked up?’ asked Bridget.

She started to tell a story about a recent misunderstanding at work, but Erin could not focus on what Bridget was saying. Her thoughts were stuck repeating what she had blurted out when he opened the door. I’m really sorry. She should have been more assertive. It did not matter who she was, he was responsible for a problem. It’s just...it’s difficult to sleep. I’m really sorry. A public nuisance. She was an adult, she could say these things. She could threaten a noise complaint. Call the council first thing in the morning. Again and again, she was imagining the interaction differently, but it was stupid and useless and always punctuated by Erin’s nervous apology.

‘I said sorry,’ Erin said.

Bridget stopped talking, then started again and now Erin heard her clearly. ‘What for? For telling his kids to be quiet? Erin, why?’

‘I don’t know. I was nervous.’

Three bubbles had formed in the curve of the glass. Erin watched to see if they would swallow each other or disappear one by one. Bridget did not say anything else.

On Monday morning, a migraine pressed like a slow explosion at the front of Erin’s face. It made her feel strange and sick; it was as though her body was moving at odds
with her thoughts, so every time she wanted to do something she felt she had to wait for her body to catch up.

She went to take her bins out of the yard. When she opened the back gate, there was a pile of cardboard boxes in her way. Next door’s recycling had spilled past their yard wall like mould, spreading over into Erin’s space and across the already narrow alley. She lifted up one of the flaps of the largest box with her foot and discovered that it contained an intricate maze of plastic tunnels. The boys had got a pet. A small rodent of some kind. Maybe more than one.

She nudged the box away but it was damp and heavy from being sat in a puddle. It crumpled into itself more than it moved, so Erin had to drag it away and then her fingers felt gritty from the disintegrating cardboard.

It was the first thing she told Bridget when she gave up trying to sleep that night.

‘They must’ve got a hamster or something,’ Erin said.

‘Next door? That can’t be good.’

She was sitting up. It was cold, so she had a hot water bottle nestled against her stomach like a warm little animal. Bridget’s house had been completely dark when Erin went to bed, but she answered as soon as Erin reached out to her.

‘How do you know?’ Bridget asked.

‘I saw the cardboard boxes for the cage just now.’

Bridget sighed, then laughed quietly. ‘They’re buggers to keep, though. Gerbils.’

Erin had been waiting to talk to her about it. ‘My brother had two,’ she said.

‘Ugh. Vicious.’
‘I never touched them, though I think they nipped him a few times. They didn’t last very long.’

‘I don’t suppose they did.’ There was a certain tone to Bridget’s voice, a kind of expectant chuckle, and Erin knew she wanted her to tell the story.

Dad stretched up to the cabinet in the garage, teasing down a stack of shoeboxes with a pair of garden shears. The boxes teetered on the edge of the shelf, and then tipped forwards; he tried to catch them but they all fell down at once in a tumble of cardboard and dust. They scattered around his feet.

‘Pick one, then,’ he said.

Rhys bent down to the box nearest him.

‘Not that one. That’s a good one.’

‘Which one, then?’

Dad sighed. ‘Erin, stick the light on. There. That one.’

He kicked a box with a tear down one of the edges. She saw the matching lid near her bicycle, so she went and fetched it, handing it out to Rhys.

‘That’ll do.’ Rhys took the lid from her and went to the end of the garage, pushing open the metal door and revealing the gerbil cage sitting between the cars on the drive. ‘Are you coming to help, then?’

‘You killed it, why do I have to touch it?’ Dad said. ‘I did the last one.’

Rhys removed the wire lid. Sawdust spilled out onto the tarmac with each warm gust. Erin walked over and peered down at the still ball of fur lying in the corner of the plastic tray. Rhys rubbed his face. ‘At least get me something. A spatula.’

Dad folded his arms. ‘Just pick it up, for Christ’s sake.’
Her brother stared at the dead gerbil. She did not think she saw regret in his expression. He certainly was not grieving. This was more like an unpleasant chore, like a bizarre task Dad had asked of him. For the most part she was relieved that the gerbils were finally gone, but she was still sad. Especially since she had read that they lived for about four years in the guidebook her parents had given Rhys. The gerbils lasted about a year, then died three weeks apart.

Rhys looked up at his sister, hopeful.

‘No, don’t make her do it,’ Dad said. ‘It’s got nothing to do with her. Your responsibility. Come on, pal. Count of three.’

Rhys screwed up his face like he did when he ate broccoli, and plunged his hands towards the little body. He tossed the gerbil into the shoebox as though it burnt his skin. He must have been sweating because flakes of sawdust stuck to his palms. Horrified, he fiercely batted his hands together, shaking the bits onto the ground. Then he slammed the lid on the box and set off for the back garden, sending the wooden gate crashing into the wall.

‘I never want gerbils,’ Erin declared. Partly because it was true, but also because she wanted some attention from Dad when she knew his mood was sour with her brother. ‘Not even a hamster. Not even a fish.’

He put his hand on her shoulder and led her to the front door. ‘That’s the spirit.’

Bridget laughed in all the right places. As Erin was telling her, she slipped further and further into the bed, and now she was lying down. She stretched out her hand and switched off the light. Her phone screen cast a thin glow into the room.
‘Do you think the boys next door will be any better than Rhys at looking after pets?’ Bridget asked.

‘Unlikely.

‘That’s sad. Although I can’t help wondering how they’d bury it. Hey, don’t go kicking the next cardboard box you see outside their gate.’

Erin laughed, but it just sounded like a sharp exhalation of breath. She had closed her eyes a few moments ago and now she could not think of anything else to say.

‘Tired?’

‘Mm. Thanks, Bridget.’

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Chapter 7

‘What?’ asked Pat, turning her head to catch what Erin was now looking at in the corner.

She squinted. It did not happen again. ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I thought I saw something.’

Pat touched her shoulder, but Erin was still staring at a space in the corner of the staffroom and the sudden contact startled her. Pat did not let go, though. Erin looked at her.
‘Your eyes are red,’ said Pat. ‘You’re not upset, are you? Has something happened?’

Erin felt her cheeks become hot. She rubbed her eyes.

‘Still not sleeping?’

‘No,’ said Erin.

Pat opened the cupboard door under the sink and brought out a roll of blue paper towels. ‘Perhaps a cold compress would help, although you’ll have to use this.’

Erin took the roll from her. ‘Thanks.’

‘My eyes do all sorts of daft things when I’m tired.’

‘They do?’

‘Oh yes,’ Pat said. ‘You don’t need glasses, do you? Lucky. It’s blurry on a good day, but when I’m tired I can’t see a flipping thing whether I’ve got my glasses on or not.’

But the world was not blurry; Erin was seeing things that were not there at all. It had first happened when she was getting ready for work that morning. Erin had been in the kitchen, and had gone to retrieve a mug from the night before that she had left in the living room. As she had walked past the narrow staircase, she stopped and turned, her muscles rigid with tension. There had been nothing there – the stairs looked the same – but for a very brief moment, she had seen a dark shape hovering above the middle steps.

She rubbed her eyes again. She was not seeing ghosts, she thought; ghosts were not real. Everyone knew that. But still, even though she only saw fleeting images, Erin could picture them clearly. Dark shapes that seemed to wait for her.

She was suddenly annoyed at Pat – people were pretending to understand what she was feeling, but they kept making wrong assumptions. And they were so set on
sharing their own experiences of sleep that they would not listen to Erin when she wanted to tell them about something.

Pat was still talking. ‘I remember once when I’d just had Owain – my eldest – who never slept, and I remember being just so tired that I walked straight into a shop window. Right into it. Smack!’

She clapped her hands together. Erin winced.

‘Sorry, love,’ she said, reaching to touch Erin’s arm again. ‘I keep making you jump. Get some cold water on your face and you’ll feel better.’

When Pat left, Erin tore away a few sheets from the roll and soaked them in cold water. She held the lump of damp paper to her eyes, but she could already feel it falling apart in her fingers. She sighed; she would probably have flecks of paper stuck to her face for the rest of the day. Her sleeves were starting to get damp where water was running down her raised arms.

She started to feel better, though. The coolness of the water was easing her aching eyes and it soothed the skin around them. She leant over the sink, propping her elbows on the edge. Behind the wad of paper, she closed her eyes.

It was quiet in the room. She listened to the rhythm of her breathing. The sound gradually became deeper, and seemed to come from the space between her ears rather than her chest. She was vaguely aware of numbness in her arms, but it did not seem to bother her.

She inhaled sharply and pulled her hands away from her face. She blinked hard. Standing up against the sink was not the place to fall asleep – and she had been close. The gold shapes behind her eyelids had begun to shift, to form objects, people, trees. Erin had been thinking about lots and lots of trees. She threw the paper in the
bin and it struck the bottom with a heavy thud. Her face was tingling where the air met the damp skin. It woke her up again.

For the rest of the day, Erin continued to see shadows flitting in the corner of her eye. She had difficulty focusing, and as the hours passed the strange dots and shapes occurred more often. And on the way home, as she turned the corner to her street, she was startled by a figure in the doorway of a house she passed. As soon as she flinched, however, she saw that it was just the brown handrail attached to the wall. An elderly woman lived there and Erin saw that handrail every time she walked into town. She felt like an idiot, and quickly looked around to check if anyone had seen her jump at nothing. But the street was empty of people, and Bridget’s car was gone. She carried on to her house and let herself in.

Even though she was convinced that it was the lack of sleep that was affecting her sight, she was still concerned by what was happening. To see things vanish just as she turned to look at them had made her skittish. She could not shake the fear that had been there the first time it had happened that morning – when she thought there had been a person lurking on her staircase. Each breath was too quick and too shallow, and her lungs seemed to snag every few minutes.

She got out of bed that night and went to see if Bridget’s light was on. It was. She went back under the duvet, closed her eyes and called.

‘Still up?’ Bridget asked.

‘Mm.’

‘Did something happen? You seem upset.’

Bridget laughed. ‘Of course. Are you all right, though, Erin? You sound worried. I’m not a doctor.’

‘That’s the point.’ Erin had not meant to say that. She could not check herself in time; she was too tired to think things through properly.

‘Ha! Well, I’ll do my best. What have you been feeling? Besides tired.’

Erin was not sure how to describe it. She remembered her conversation with Pat, and how she had never actually told her what she had been seeing. Erin had never been very good at describing her symptoms to other people, even when she was little. She would just sit there, the colour draining from her face, and wait for someone to notice that she was sick. Why did she never speak up when she was ill? She thought there must be something to it, some long tangle of grisly little reasons. She could pursue it, now that she was thinking about it. She felt as though she had the thread in her hands and all she needed to do was follow it. But she remembered that she had not answered Bridget yet, and she still needed to talk to her about her eyes.

‘Not so much feeling,’ Erin said.

‘Seeing things.’

‘Yes.’

‘Hallucinating?’ Bridget sounded distressed.

‘No, no, no. Not like that. Well, kind of. It’s hard to describe. It’s like, when I go upstairs or turn on a light or quickly look in a certain direction, I see the tail end of something. You know - like in horror films, when the monster or whatever flits out of sight when someone shines a torch on it. I don’t watch horror films, but I assume that’s what usually happens.’

Bridget made little sounds of agreement – if Erin had been able to see her, she knew Bridget would have been nodding – and she felt better for being understood.
Had she made her worry? Had she wanted her to worry? Was that why she could not explain her symptoms properly, so that people thought she was worse than she actually was? She shook the thought away. She was not that sort of person. She did not look for sympathy.

‘Still there?’ asked Bridget.

‘Yes, sorry.’

‘I get that all the time,’ Bridget said. ‘Sometimes I really think there’s something there, like a spider or a big moth, and I call out. Of course, as soon as I yelp I realise there was nothing there in the first place. Or it was just a bit of fluff or something. My husband just ignores me when I do it now.’

‘Then there’s nothing wrong with my eyes?’

‘As I said, I’m not a doctor. What’s your eyesight like?’

‘It seems okay. It’s usually pretty good. I have a headache most of the time now, though, which makes it difficult to focus.’

‘And you’ve only started seeing things since you’ve stopped sleeping properly?’

‘Yes. It doesn’t matter how light it is, either.’

‘How often does it happen?’ Bridget asked.

‘It started this morning and it’s been happening all day,’ Erin told her. ‘I saw it when I was getting ready for work – it was like there was someone on my stairs, and then it kept happening in the library. There would be someone in the corner of a room or when I went through a door. Everywhere.’

‘Someone?’ she asked.

Erin paused. ‘What?’

‘You keep saying it’s “someone”.’
'Someone?’ Erin said. ‘Oh. Someone…didn’t think of it like…yes. It always looks like a person. I was walking past the house at the top – the one with the handrail by the door. Don’t laugh, but from the corner of my eye it looked like there was someone leaning there. Someone –’

‘You know I wouldn’t laugh,’ she said.

‘Thanks.’

‘And you know you’re safe, don’t you? I can see that there’s no one outside.’

‘Mm.’

‘You just need to get some sleep. Go to sleep, and you’ll feel better.’

Erin did not say anything else, so Bridget was silent, too. After a few minutes, Erin relaxed and fell asleep.

She dreamt of trees again. She was in a forest and it was dark so she could not see very much at all. But she was aware of the trees around her, shifting and lowering their branches ever closer to her body. The trees rattled as they moved, like bones clinking on metal bars.

Her alarm was beeping. Erin woke up and turned it off, but the echo of the trees in her dream hung around her ears like the buzz of an insect. She had heard that noise before, she thought.

When she heard the boys next door laughing as they walked past her house, she thought about the boxes disintegrating outside their yard. Then she thought about Rhys’s gerbils again, and she suddenly remembered the source of the rattling sound that was stuck in the front of her mind. It was the sound his gerbils had made when they ran in their wheel.
His bedroom was across the landing from Erin’s, separated by a thin plaster wall. It was against this wall that Dad had helped Rhys set up the cage, and when the gerbils worked the exercise wheel at night, Erin could hear the muffled rattle of plastic against metal bars. At first, she thought it was funny. She would lie in bed imagining them wearing tiny white trainers on their paws and towels draped across their furry shoulders, running and running on that wheel and never getting anywhere. Or she would imagine that they were powering the streetlamp outside, and the light would fizzle out if they stopped. She came up with hundreds of stories for them, and she would think about it until she fell asleep.

Around that time, there was a brief but intense period when she had bad dreams. She was eight years old. She remembered it now because she had always blamed her nightmares on the gerbils. The dreams started as a few images, and then they developed a plot and gradually got worse each time the scenario recurred. Erin had dreamt about trees, then, too. That was how she began to be afraid of the woods.

Behind the house she grew up in, down a little dusty lane with a strip of uncut grass running through the middle, there was a wooden gate that opened onto a cluster of trees. At the village school, the children had called it ‘the coed’ – as though naming it in Welsh gave it a mysterious and ancient power. That patch of trees seemed endless when Erin was small, but she had since discovered that it barely covered two acres. She had not always been afraid of the trees, either. She and her brother used to go ‘collecting’ in autumn, pulling up the bottom of their jumpers like a pouch and carrying whatever they could find; leaves and twigs and conkers, mostly. Then they would stagger back and arrange their haul in lines parallel to the patio doors and leave it there until Mum or Dad nudged it all with their feet into the flowerbeds. But as soon
as the nightmares started, Erin would refuse to go anywhere near the woods. She did not care if Rhys made fun of her; she would not set foot in them.

In those dreams, there was something shifting in and out of the trees. Erin would run away before she could see it emerge – whatever it was. Every time she woke up, she thought she could still hear the crackling and rustling of the dry branches. After this happened a few times, she realised that it was the sound of the gerbils. She stopped imagining them running in silly costumes, then. She could not shake the unease of the dreams, and the noise the animals made only reminded her of that feeling.

And then the nightmares got worse. The next few times she dreamt about the woods, the presence would come closer and closer. Sometimes she was unable to run, temporarily stuck in mud or frozen by her own terror. One night, she managed to run all the way back to her bedroom in the dream, only to find that the monster was tapping against the glass of her window. She peeked over the top of her duvet. She heard the sound of a click. The window opened. Her curtains billowed slowly forwards as though under water and then a pair of hands with long, tapering fingers reached inside the room, inching towards her face. She woke up and immediately began to cry. Dad, a light sleeper, came into her room a few minutes later. He tried to comfort her, but she could still hear the endless sound of the gerbils’ wheel.

Now, Erin churned up the memories in her mind. She lingered over some parts more than others, such as the image of the hands coming through the window, and found she could not distract herself from thinking about it even though it made her uncomfortable.
She tried to sleep until twelve, but she knew it would not happen easily that night. She decided she needed to tell Bridget. She could only sleep after she had talked to her.

Bridget listened in silence while she told her, from the beginning, about her childhood nightmares.

‘That’s awful,’ Bridget said. ‘I’m sorry you went through that. But tell me – after the gerbils died, did the nightmares carry on?’

She thought about it. ‘I’m pretty sure they did. Yes, I know they did; I’d been secretly delighted at the thought that I wouldn’t hear that sound again, but the dreams carried on with the rattling noise anyway. And I remember feeling awful because of it. Children shouldn’t have to feel like that.’

‘No,’ Bridget said. ‘The dreams stopped, though?’

‘Eventually. Nights would pass where I wouldn’t dream about anything. And that happened more and more frequently until the dreams stopped altogether. And then I suppose I forgot. I can’t believe I forgot…’

‘You’re dreaming about it again?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It was only brief images at first – more of a feeling than anything else. And I’d been glad, actually, because then I knew for sure that I had at least slept for a little while. But I started to feel as though I’d had the dreams before. Now I know why. And recently, they’ve been getting longer, more detailed, just like they did when I was eight.’

‘Well, why is it happening again?’

‘I really don’t know. There must be a reason. I just…I think there are other things I’ve forgotten.’

‘I see,’ Bridget said. ‘Do you think you’ll remember?’
‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure if I want to. I do – of course I do.’

‘You can’t sleep because there’s something you’ve forgotten,’ Bridget said quietly.

‘Yes, I think so.’

Bridget paused for a moment. ‘Is it the dark? Is there something you can do to make you less afraid? What did you do when you were eight?’

‘Well, my parents didn’t like me or my brother staying up past our bedtime, so neither of us had night lights,’ Erin said. ‘After that really bad night, though, Dad offered to buy one for me. He’d talked Mum into it. I refused, though. I didn’t want Rhys to tease me so I begged Dad not to tell him about my nightmares. But I remember pulling back my duvet one night to find a little torch lying on my bed. I used it as little as I dared in case Rhys was awake and could see the beam.’

‘A torch,’ she said. ‘Anything else?’

A name came into Erin’s head. A voice. ‘Henry.’

‘Who’s Henry?’

‘He was a lion. A stuffed lion I got from the zoo when I was five or six.’ Erin smiled. ‘I gave him so much personality – especially when the nightmares started. I mean, he was always my favourite, but he seemed to become really important when I began to be too scared to sleep at night.’

Bridget chuckled. ‘And what was he like?’

‘He was very brave, obviously. But there was something about his eyes that seemed endlessly sympathetic towards me.’ She paused to yawn. ‘He seemed to change at night – to wake up. I could hear him, like he was real. He was protective. Henry would reassure me that it was okay to lie down. I would face the wall so I couldn’t see the door or the window, and I would tuck him over my shoulder.’
‘He would keep watch.’

‘He would. And he’d scare away the bad things. I couldn’t fall asleep without him.’

‘Where is he now?’ Bridget asked.

‘Under my bed. At Mum and Dad’s house.’

‘Do you miss him?’

‘A little bit,’ she said. ‘Doesn’t everyone? It was so simple, having him there when I needed to talk or squeeze his paws for reassurance. He was always ready to help. I suppose that’s what relationships are for, though.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I think being awake is harder when your partner is fast asleep. Sometimes I see him lying there and I want to clap my hands next to his ears and say it was the house settling. I don’t, of course. But I want to, and it makes me sad. Good thing we’ve got this spare bedroom, really.’

The self-help section of the library was upstairs. Erin had been avoiding it; now that Pat and Nicholas knew what was wrong, she was reluctant to show that she was getting increasingly desperate to sleep. She did not want their advice or concern, and she did not want them to suggest seeing a doctor. But the books on the floor above seemed to call out to her – she was constantly aware of them. Even though she had trawled through online articles and forums, she thought there might be something she had not seen before in one of those books. A more traditional method, perhaps. It might make her realise what she was missing and help her to see what she was doing wrong. The answer might be there. But she could not risk going to look.
Then, one afternoon, there was a problem with the printer. Erin was by the fiction shelves when Pat came to announce it. She would try to sort it out herself, she said, and disappeared again. At the front desk, Nicholas tangled his fingers in his hair.

Erin crept into the corner and out of sight. She thought her motives would be obvious if she went upstairs now. Perhaps they would think she had broken the printer just so she could sneak up and devour all the books she could find about sleep. She waited, and a few minutes later Pat returned, red in the face, and beckoned for Nicholas to come and help her. He looked startled, and his eyes quickly scanned the library for Erin. But he could not see her. Nervously, he came around the desk and followed Pat into the office.

Erin stepped out of her hiding place, hurried across the open space by the desk and up the steps to the first floor. It was light and airy up there, and because of the long, glass-panelled mezzanine she could still see down to the ground floor.

She looked around. The upper floor was deserted except for a man sitting by himself at the big table. He had a map spread out in front of him. He lifted his head and caught her eye.

‘Ah!’ he whispered, getting up. ‘I wonder if I might pick your brain about something. Won’t take long.’

Go away, Erin thought. He had an old notebook in his hand and he showed it to her. It smelled strongly of stale cigarette smoke. There was a black and white photograph of a derelict farmhouse stuck to the page. The tape was yellow and sick-looking with age, and Erin could see a brown hair trapped beneath it.

‘I’m doing a little local research,’ he said.

Erin’s heart sank. The self help books were on the other side of the floor and she was wasting time. Why could no one leave her alone? So tired. She was so tired.
‘...and he neglected to write down the location of the farmhouse. It’s the only place left, you see, so I’m determined.’

She squinted at him. ‘I’m sorry, but what are you asking?’

The man’s lips formed a tight line. She could see an irregular pulse at the top of his jaw. He jabbed his finger at the photograph. ‘I want to visit this farmhouse. Retrace my father’s walks. Only, I don’t know its exact location. Do you recognise it?’

She spoke without thinking. ‘It’s probably a housing estate by now.’

He opened his mouth and made a sound like a creaky cupboard door. Erin suddenly became nervous. She could not see anyone else in the library – Pat and Nicholas were still in the office. The man was staring at her and she felt exposed. She wanted to run.

‘I mean,’ she stammered, ‘it’s just…develop…and…there have been a lot of developments recently. And it looks like an old photograph.’

‘It is old,’ he said, his voice filling the entire building. ‘But this area is full of old things, still. Old churches, old bridges, old farm houses.’

Erin rubbed her eyes. ‘I don’t know where that is. I’m sorry. It could be anywhere.’

The man seemed to understand that he was making her nervous. He had been bending slightly to show her the notebook, but now he straightened up. He was thin, but very tall and his eyebrows were sharp and accusatory.

‘Isn’t this the part where you direct me to something that might be a little more helpful? A local archive, perhaps. You do know whether you have a local archive, at least?’
She inhaled sharply, but her body was so tense that her lungs held the air in place. She heard voices. Nicholas was walking back to the front desk. Her chest relaxed.

‘You should ask Nicholas,’ she said, pointing over the balcony. The man kept his eyes on her. ‘He knows a lot about local history. My expertise is a little less niche than what you’re asking for.’

He did not answer. He picked up his backpack and then pounded down the stairs. She was exhausted, but her mind was churning his voice into yapping snippets. She watched him walk to the front desk and she felt strangely detached, as though she were watching a play.

Rubbing her eyes again, she did a quick circuit of the first floor. By the time she returned to the balcony, the man had gone.

‘Did he leave?’ she called to Nicholas.

He looked up and nodded.

She started to walk down the stairs, but she remembered the map he had left on the table. She stopped, sighed, and went back.

It was an Ordnance Survey map of the area. The folds were becoming fibrous, and some were coming apart near the edges. She stared at it blankly until the swirls and lines and symbols made her eyes sting. She did not have the energy to fold it up again. It seemed like an impossible task – she just did not have the capability to do it. Anger still bubbled inside her, and she could see herself getting irritated if she so much as made an attempt.

‘Want some help?’ Nicholas asked, climbing up the last of the stairs.

‘Did he say I was horrible?’
He smiled. ‘Something like that. He was awfully rude, wasn’t he? And he’s not even tidied up after himself, look.’

He came closer and Erin could see his eyes glittering as they scanned the features of the map. She looked down again, following the roads and the rivers. Slowly, she worked her way north as though her attention was being pulled along by a rope. She was searching for something. The villages dropped away and the road began to writhe. She passed the village she had grown up in and kept going. Red contours like fractures bunched closer and closer. And then she came to a lake the size of her thumbnail. Next to the lake was a blotch of woodland. Her breath caught and she coughed. She had found Bryn Hen.

‘Here,’ Nicholas said, ‘Let me have a go.’

Erin shuffled out of the way, but kept her eyes fixed on the patch of green until Nicholas blocked her view.

His hands shook a little, but he took the map and carefully folded it until it was like a clam in its bright pink shell.

‘I didn’t mean to be like that,’ she said, soothed by the way he had brought the map together.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said. ‘It was a bit of a ridiculous quest anyway. How should we know where to find a farm house with absolutely no information? There must be hundreds in this county.’

‘Where did you send him?’

‘Council.’ He laughed as though he had told her the punch line to a joke.

Erin thought about Bridget. Then she thought about her bed; she wanted to hide under her duvet as soon as she got home.
‘I think you could use a cup of tea,’ he said, and they went down the stairs together.

But later, when she got home, she found she could not face the thought of going to bed so early. She had calmed down from her exchange with the man in the library, and instead told her Dad about it in an email. She thought he would find it funny.

She turned on the television after dinner, and chuckled to see a tall man looking wistful as he trudged up a hill. The presenter seemed nice but she could not stop herself from making childish judgements about him. It made her feel better about her earlier confrontation in the library.

The programme ended, and the announcer’s voice came soft and rich through the speakers. Erin got up to get a drink, but she froze when she realised what the man was saying.

‘How long does it take you to fall asleep?’ he asked. Her heart was beating quickly. ‘Do you lie awake all night? Patrick Norman investigates our modern sleeping habits – and where we’re going wrong. That’s coming up in just a moment.’

Erin went back to the sofa, sat down, and turned so she could peek through the blinds. There was only a dim light in Bridget’s living room, and it did not flicker. Did Bridget know about the programme? She wanted to tell her, but her phone was upstairs and she did not want to miss anything important by going to get it. She had to hope that Bridget would turn on her television in time. It might say something that would help them both.

But after just ten minutes, Erin’s optimism waned. The introduction showed toddlers rattling the bars of their cot like enraged prisoners, and teenagers clutching smartphones and tablets. Men in suits drank coffee and then writhed under duvets in
the ghostly green light of a night vision camera. It was wrong. Their problems were not like her own; she did not see herself in any of these people.

Blue light was the problem, said the presenter. Blue light and sugar.

‘Blue light?’ Bridget asked later when, still enraged by the hour-long programme, Erin could not sleep. ‘What’s that?’

‘It’s the light from screens,’ she said. ‘Smartphone screens and tablets. It makes you think it’s daytime. But it’s fine, because apparently you can press a button to make the screen look like dusk. And then you can sleep again.’

‘Right. And what was the other one?’

‘Sugar.’

‘Sugar. And that was it?’

‘That was it,’ Erin said.

Bridget laughed, loud and sudden like a villain in a children’s cartoon. ‘I wish it was blue light and sugar. How ridiculous. Did they say anything else? Anything at all?’

She rubbed her forehead. ‘Just what sleep deprivation does to you. Lack of concentration, irritability. And then some stuff about sleepwalking.’

‘Yeah, we know what sleep deprivation does.’ Bridget’s voice had a mocking edge to it. ‘God, it’s infuriating.’

‘But they were also going on about the millions of pounds spent on sleep medication every year. Millions, Bridget.’

‘All because of blue light, eh?’ she said, and laughed again. She was just as angry as Erin. Angrier, even.

‘That isn’t what’s causing it. Not for me.’ The words seemed hard and heavy, like pebbles sinking in water.
‘No,’ said Bridget.

‘The people they interviewed – I’m not like them. It’s not…it’s different. I don’t do it to myself.’

‘I know,’ she said.

‘I don’t know what else to do – I thought it would tell me what I’ve been doing wrong but it didn’t.’

‘I know.’

‘This has been an exhausting day.’

They were quiet for a few minutes. Then a feeling rose up in Erin. She was thinking about the man in the library, and wondered if she should tell Bridget about it. But then she imagined herself walking up a hill, and it began to feel real and she saw that it was night. She felt crowded but exposed all at the same time, and she did not want to walk back through the trees.

‘What are we doing? We’re not going in there, are we?’

Erin’s class stood at the black mouth of the woods. The clearing was lit only by the moon shining weakly through thin clouds. She could see their silhouettes – disproportioned and bulky under their borrowed coats. Fragments of people’s faces.

‘Are we going in there?’ asked William again. He was unusually serious. His limbs were twitching like he was trying to grasp at something in the darkness and he looked to each of his classmates for support. ‘What’s happening? Does anyone know?’

‘Will you shush so I can explain?’ said Mr Davies, switching a torch on and off to get the children’s attention. William whimpered and then fell quiet. ‘Is everyone here? I’d do a headcount but I can’t see. Miss Baxter?’
'I’m here,’ came her reply from behind the group. ‘Everyone’s here. But I don’t think this is a good idea.’

‘It’s absolutely fine. Just a short walk through these trees, and then out the other side. And there’ll be a surprise when we get there. It’ll be great.’

Erin could sense him beaming proudly through the darkness, clashing with the nervousness of her classmates.

‘We’re going in there?’ William whispered. ‘I can’t do it. It’s too dark. I can’t.’

‘It’s important you keep together. I’ll keep my torch on, so don’t let the beam get out of your sight. Is everyone ready?’

In response, William started to cry. Not a dramatic wail, but a real and terrified sobbing that seemed to knot in his chest until he was struggling to breathe. He sounded like a cat choking on a hairball. Mr Davies sighed and shone his torch at them without warning. It stung Erin’s eyes and she felt Sarah flinch next to her. A blue and orange circle hovered in her gaze. They all turned to look at William.

On a normal school day, he was the boy who ended up with his back against the wall out in the corridor for putting PVA glue in someone’s hair or coming in from lunch with a big beetle in his cupped hands. He was loud and stubborn, would threaten to show you his scabs if you bothered him. But in the bright beam of Mr Davies’ torch, he seemed to shrink away from his classmates. His hands were over his face but Erin could see the redness of his forehead; his whole body rippled like a flag in a storm. He wanted to run. She could tell by the way the heels of his wellies scuffed into the dirt. But he had nowhere to go; they were surrounded by the dark woodland that terrified him. Miss Baxter put her hand on his shoulder, and looked directly into Mr Davies’ torch so that the light made her face white like the moon.
‘You’re not going to make him go,’ she said.

‘We are all going. It’s going to be an adventure, William. And you can tell your mum how brave you were. I’ll call her and let her know when we get back. If you stop crying, I’ll give you a certificate.’

They stood for a few more minutes while William calmed down. The thought of praise – the solid kind he could give to his parents in exchange for a reward – seemed to give him a small burst of courage. He took his hands away from his face and his cheeks shone with tears. In the spotlight of the torch, he wiped the wetness away with his palms. But his eyes were wide and full of fear. Miss Baxter asked him if he wanted to hold her hand and he shook his head violently.

Mr Davies set off into the opening of the trees. His torch flitted from trunk to trunk like a ghost. Erin felt Sarah gingerly hold onto the Velcro strap on the sleeve of her anorak, but Erin was scared too so she took her hand. Sarah seemed relieved.

‘In case we fall over,’ Sarah whispered.

The class stepped into the woods. They did not talk to each other; they had nothing to say except how afraid they were, and Mr Davies had made it clear he did not want to hear such things. In any case, the children were too busy concentrating on the darting of Mr Davies’ light, fearful that it might suddenly disappear. Only the soft encouragement of Miss Baxter from the back of the group, where she and Mr Parker had linked arms, interrupted the hissing leaves and snapping twigs.

Erin was exposed to a new kind of darkness. Her house was in a rural village, but there the scattering of streetlights gave the night a soft, reassuring glow. Walking through this patch of forest was different. Mr Davies illuminated the path by his feet, but for the first time Erin saw a torch beam become swallowed up and defeated. It fanned out on the ground and up the sides of trees, and showed the trees behind, and
then outlines of the trees behind those, and then the darkness held like a wall. The fierce light of the torch that had stung her eyes in the clearing was useless now.

The blackness felt thick. It felt crowded. Erin’s mind began to fill the void around her with monsters and witches; every sharp crack that did not come from the group was a beast approaching, waiting to pounce. But she was mostly scared of the trees. She squeezed Sarah’s hand and Sarah squeezed back. It was as though the trees were watching them stumble along the path. When she looked away from Mr Davies, there was nothing but black and her eyes flitted over nothing. She knew there were trees there, but she could not see them. She could not see anything. It was stifling. All she had was Sarah’s hand and the shaking beam of light in the distance.

‘Almost there now,’ said Mr Davies. His voice was sharp, as though he was about to shout.

‘Are you okay, Erin?’ Sarah whispered.

‘Not really. Are you?’

Erin felt Sarah’s hand jerk suddenly downwards as she almost tripped. She said she was fine but Erin knew she was only saying that to make her feel better.

‘Here we are!’ Mr Davies yelled.

‘Jesus Christ,’ muttered Mr Parker from the back.

The group spilled out of an opening in the trees and faced a small, steep slope. Mr Davies immediately began to climb it, probably so he did not have to look at the scared faces of the class. He clutched the grass with one hand and thumped his torch down into the ground with the other. The children followed, but it was tricky in their ill-fitting wellies and the rubber slipped on the damp bank.

‘When you get to the top, I want you all to lie down. It’s a bit wet, so put your hoods up so your heads aren’t on the ground. Let’s go, come on.’
Weak and trembling with fear from the walk, the group lay down on the cold grass. The children still had to make the return journey. Erin did not think she could go back into that darkness again.

‘I want you all to be very quiet,’ said Mr Davies, although no one had said very much at all since they entered the forest. ‘And look up. The clouds will clear in a moment. We just have to be patient for a few minutes.’

They could see clouds gliding in front of the moon. Occasionally, the sky would clear a little, and for a few seconds Mr Davies tried desperately to point out the newly revealed star before it was covered again. But either the children could not find it in time, or they were simply not interested. Erin was getting frustrated and she started to pull out tufts of grass. All that fear walking through the woods for a couple of unimpressive stars.

She felt something fall on her forehead and she quickly brushed it away. The hissing of her anorak broke the silence.

‘No fidgeting,’ said Mr Davies. ‘It’ll clear up. I know it will.’

Erin felt it again. She thought it was a fly, but then she heard murmuring among her and the sound of other coats rustling.

‘Is it raining?’ Sarah whispered.

Tiny drops continued to dot Erin’s face and cling to her hair. Below her, she could hear rain pattering softly on the trees.

‘We should go back,’ said Miss Baxter.

‘Ah,’ Mr Davies sighed, defeated. ‘Yes. I suppose we better had.’

A brief flash lit the hill and the grey clouds above. Erin saw the whites of Sarah’s eyes. Then it was dark again. The children were quiet, stunned. And then they
started to panic in a chorus of squeals and anxious giggles. A few moments later, a
low rumble made everyone fall silent again.

‘Ten seconds,’ Sarah said. ‘What do you times it by? I can’t remember.’

‘Don’t you divide it?’ Erin said.

‘Everyone up,’ called Mr Davies. He was suddenly nervous. ‘Up, up! Let’s
hurry back before it gets closer.’

‘Through the trees?’ said Miss Baxter. ‘Is that safe?’

‘It’s still a few miles away,’ he said. ‘I’ve got my torch, here. We’ll be fine.
We’re all wearing wellies, aren’t we? And what are those made of?’

‘Rubber,’ the children shouted, drawing out the syllables.

‘Exactly! Nothing to worry about. But we should hurry before the rain gets
closest.’

They had to choose between the storm and the forest. Somewhere to her left,
Erin heard William quietly whimpering. The lightning was more real than whatever
they thought was in the forest, so they descended the hill. The grass was wet and
slippery. Sarah crouched and shuffled down with her hands between her feet like
when they pretended to be frogs in P.E. lessons. Erin and some of the other children
copied her because it looked safe and smart. Everyone else hurtled down with their
heels sliding out from under them, straight into Mr Parker’s stomach or the rough
embrace of a tree.

Following the torch again, the group entered the woods. The walk felt much
worse this time. The thunder had startled them all, and the trees seemed to sense their
vulnerability. Shapes in the darkness were clearer, noises were louder, and wherever
Mr Davies pointed the beam of his torch he caught the edge of a dark, fleeting image.
The sound of the rain in the trees was all around them; a chaotic drumming above
their heads that made them quicken their pace and stumble flustered over rocks and thick roots. They did not look back, but they felt the storm making its steady pursuit. Erin and Sarah held each other’s hand as tightly as they could. But it was not Sarah’s hand Erin wanted. She wanted the strong grip of her Dad. She wanted someone brave, but Sarah was just as scared as she was. Everyone was scared. Even the adults.

They burst through the trees into the clearing but they did not linger to catch their breath. The rain was heavier now that they were out of the shelter of the woods. Mr Davies had a quick word with Mr Parker and Miss Baxter, and then the boys broke away and the girls went into their dormitories on either side of the main building.

‘Is everyone all right?’ Miss Baxter panted, coming through the door behind them.

In the strong fluorescent lights of the room, they looked at each other. Their anoraks were wet; their pale faces blotched with red.

Sarah reached up her little hand and plucked a blade of grass from Erin’s hair. She held it up to Erin as though she might want to keep it.

Erin pointed at Sarah’s head. ‘You’ve got loads, too.’

Wet grass was stuck to her wellies like fur. There was grass all over her coat, too. Erin’s back felt clammy and cold.

‘I’d, um… recommend not using the showers,’ said Miss Baxter, still standing in the doorway. ‘Did you all bring a towel? Just give your hair a quick rub like this. Don’t go to bed while it’s wet. And try to get the grass out.’

Miss Baxter told the girls to hang up their coats on the posts of the bunkbeds, and they left their wellies lined up in the corridor. She said she would be back to turn the light off later, and then she went out. The rain was beating against the thin roof of
the building, and somewhere a steady drip struck a drainpipe with a hollow thud. They did not say very much as they got ready for bed, but once they were settled they began to talk.

‘This duvet smells,’ Sarah hissed from the bed above. The wooden slats creaked as she shifted position.

‘What of?’

‘You.’ She giggled, then sniffed again and became serious and disgusted. ‘It smells really old and sour and of, like…and it’s too hot. Ugh.’

A lumpy corner of duvet appeared over the side above Erin. And then a foot.

‘You’d better keep your legs in or the ghost will get you,’ Erin teased. Sarah’s foot darted back in.

‘I’m not scared,’ she said.

‘You were scared of the woods.’

‘So were you.’

Erin turned over. The mattress was tough; its plastic cover scrunched like an empty crisp packet beneath her. ‘Well, it was pretty dark. I bet there were foxes and badgers and stuff.’

‘Bears?’ Molly called from the corner. ‘There were probably bears.’

Sarah continued to chirp like a garden bird from the top bunk, but Erin stopped responding after a while. She was tired from the hurried walk and the fear she had felt in the woods. The bed was uncomfortable and yet she easily drifted off. She was asleep before Miss Baxter came back.
Chapter 8

*I’m not scared of the were you scared of the woods.* The woods Erin remembered what they were, now. It was the woods at the camp. The dense, dark woods that Mr Davies had made them walk through that night. She had been so scared. She had been scared of that horrible, close blackness, and of the sounds the woods made.

It was half past one. She picked up her phone and called Bridget again.

‘I remembered important…something important,’ Erin said.

‘The trees?’ Bridget asked.

‘Yes – when I went to the camp, we walked through the woods at night, and that’s what I was scared of. That’s where the nightmares came from.’

‘That’s great news,’ Bridget said. But then her voice changed. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Am I sure?’

‘That the walk through the woods caused your nightmares. And your insomnia.’

A shiver crept up Erin’s back. ‘Yes, I’m sure. What else would it be?’

‘I don’t know,’ Bridget said, and sighed. ‘No, perhaps that’s it. Nothing more to it.’

‘That must be it.’

‘You were just having a flashback to those nightmares. Something must have reminded you.’

‘I think so.’

‘Have you been to any woods recently?’
Erin faltered. ‘No…but it must be because of Rhys. I think it’s because Mum keeps talking about him and the camp.’

‘I see,’ Bridget said.

They were silent for a while. Erin slowly moved closer to sleep. But suddenly her heart lurched and she opened her eyes.

‘Bridget…’

‘Mm?’

‘Can’t sleep.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t have expected things to go back to normal straight away. It might take a little time before you can sleep normally again.’

Erin rolled onto her back and covered her eyes with her arm. ‘I think you’re right, you know. I’m not sure I’ve solved it.’

‘It just doesn’t feel like a satisfying reason. Wait, I don’t think “satisfying” is the right word…’

‘No,’ Erin said. ‘I know what you mean. It doesn’t really make sense. I was scared of the woods, but…’

‘Not enough to cause all of this, twenty years later?’

‘I don’t think so.’ She made a noise of frustration. ‘There must be something else, but I can’t remember.’

‘Perhaps you don’t want to know,’ Bridget said.

‘I do, though.’

‘Then you’ll remember eventually. Things have been coming back to you. Things you haven’t thought about in years. About your childhood, and about Bryn Hen.’

Erin frowned. ‘I’m so tired, though. What if I don’t ever remember?’
‘You will.’

She chewed at her bottom lip. ‘And after that? If I do remember, then what?’

‘You’ll sleep for a hundred years,’ Bridget said softly.

‘Great. Really, though – what do I do?’

‘I’ll still be here. You can work out the rest – see a doctor, if you need to – but I’ll still be here whether you go back to sleeping normally or not.’

‘Thanks,’ Erin said.

‘Try not to dwell on it.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Good. Go to sleep.’

The next day, on the way home from work, Erin suddenly stopped walking. She turned to look behind her; she had missed the turn to her street. Her heart gave a sudden thump like apples spilling from a bag. It felt like she had just woken up – she could not remember anything about the last few minutes. What had she been thinking about when she walked straight past the usual road?

A group of teenagers came towards her, and she pulled out her phone as though to read a text message. She glanced at them, and shuffled slowly to the side of the pavement while she pretended to type out a reply. She opened a new draft.

‘Hi Bridget. I can’t remember the last five minutes. Does this happen to you?’

The teenagers passed, and Erin pressed her thumb hard into the backspace icon. She watched them walk. One of the girls carried a large plastic folio containing smudged pencil drawings. The most visible sketch was a study of creases, and the page was dotted with rather stony-looking pillows. Erin rubbed her eyes, trying not to cry.
Retracing her steps would be embarrassing. She knew she would spend the rest of the walk home angry with herself for not being able to do something she did nearly every day. If she carried on, following the group of teenagers, she could turn onto the path that ran alongside the canal, and then circle back along the side streets. She had done that circuit many times before, usually on a weekend. The canal relaxed her, and the added time spent outside might help her sleep better.

The group were now lingering outside the café that stood where the public footpath started. They were eating ice creams and chatting to a man brushing down one of the horses that pulled the tourist barges. The horse was warm brown in colour, and blinked slowly in the low afternoon sun. As Erin approached, she felt a sudden surge of childish anger. She wanted to be that horse, that man, even any of the school pupils. She wanted to be anyone except herself, as long as she did not have to feel the unbearable, bone-wrenching ache of tiredness.

She walked past them and started following the canal. The path was rutted and covered with loose stones that she sent skipping ahead with the toe of her shoe. Ducks were sitting on the murky water, staying close to the fringe of leaves.

The canal was long, and the gentle ripples of the surface soothed her. She stopped for a moment, looking down into the rushes squirming like eels. Her eyes closed. Her shoulders dropped. Her breathing came from deep within her and she felt herself sinking down.

There was a noise far away. A small rattling, and a higher clink like cutlery set down on a plate. She heard Dad in the kitchen. She wondered what he was making.

‘Lucas!’
Erin opened her eyes to see a flash of blue and red. A boy was stomping the ground with his right foot, propelling his Spider-man scooter down the path. His head was down like a charging bull. He was going to crash into her.

It was as though she came apart from herself. She was still making a connection between the boy and what action she should take, but her legs were already moving. Moving forward. She stumbled, and met the freezing sheet of water. It felt electric, as though her bones were being burst inside her. The rushes nuzzled her face, and the weight of her clothes pulled her down.

Still, she felt as though she had drifted away from herself, like her body was a tugboat and she was being dragged along behind it.

The water stung her eyes. Her limbs seemed stuck. There was pressure around her middle, and she was pulled until her head met the air again. She gasped for air and from the shock of the cold.

‘Oh, Jesus. Stay away from the edge, Lucas! Are you all right? I’m so sorry.’

A tall man was holding her and leading her to the edge of the canal. The water came up to his waist, and was seeping into his coat. He got her to the wall and she pushed away from him, climbing up and onto the path. The boy, Lucas, was red in the face from crying; his scooter was lying on the ground next to him. A cyclist had dismounted, and was busy undoing her helmet as though that would help in some way. The teenagers were anxiously approaching.

‘I’m so sorry.’ The man easily hoisted himself out of the canal. ‘Can someone – are you all right? Do you need…should we call an ambulance?’

He looked to the woman with her bike for advice.

‘Let me get my phone,’ she said. Her voice was flat and quick.

‘No,’ Erin said.
The man flinched. ‘But are you hurt?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘You can’t be fine,’ said the woman. ‘They’ll just send a paramedic to check you out. In case you bumped your head, or something.’

She did not look at Erin as she said this, but kept her back turned as she searched in her backpack for her phone.

‘Don’t call anyone,’ Erin said. Something sharp and warm started to bloom in her chest. ‘I can make it home. I’m fine.’

The man started digging in his pockets. ‘Let me give you my number.’

‘What for?’

‘She’s not going home like that,’ said the woman. She rested her bike against a tree, and came towards Erin with her phone in her hand. Her head was slightly at an angle and lowered so that she was peering up at Erin even though they were the same height. Her eyes narrowed. ‘Don’t you work in the library?’

The adrenaline Erin felt now was worse than the sensation of hitting the cold canal. She had been panting, almost bent double with her hands clutching her knees, but at the woman’s approach Erin became poised like a weasel.

‘I just want to help,’ said the man, simultaneously patting his son’s head to calm him.

‘It’s all right – I think she’s just in shock. Aren’t you?’

The woman put her hand on Erin’s arm, and the grip was firm. Erin felt something rush up her spine and she pushed the woman’s shoulders with both hands. She did it harder than she had intended, and the woman staggered back.

‘Look, can you just get away from me?’

The woman’s eyes widened. ‘What’s the matter with you?’
Erin saw her type in the emergency number, but did not wait to see her lift the phone to her ear. With the loose stones crunching beneath her feet, Erin ran as fast as she could in her sodden clothes. Her hair was icy against her head, and her trousers felt as though they were melding to her legs. She kept running, passing people whose faces turned to concern or fear, but no one tried to stop her.

She relaxed a little when she came onto her familiar street, but she kept hurrying to her front door. Her keys were still in her coat pocket, but the lanyard was dripping wet. She did not stop to look if the cyclist and the man had followed her.

The door slammed shut behind her. She went straight upstairs, turned on the shower and started to peel off her clothes while steam filled the bright room. Her phone fell out of her coat pocket and onto the floor. There was condensation under the glass screen. Erin got under the shower; it seared her cold skin for a moment, and she let herself cry until the hot water started to cool.

Her phone lay next to her while she knelt on her bedroom floor and dried her hair; its screen was dark and dead. It would not respond to her touch. She tried not to look at herself in the mirror.

She made dinner but found she could not eat it. She rubbed her eyes in slow circles and let the plate in front of her grow cold. Her stomach churned; she imagined it full of a thick, slimy tangle of reeds. The pressure of the woman’s grip on her arm still lingered on her skin. *With you? Matter with you?*

She lifted her head from her hands, and saw the empty cradle of the house telephone was flashing an angry orange light. Why hadn’t she heard it? And where was the handset? When had she used it last? Where had she left it?
There was only one person who would call her landline. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, searching the room, but she could not see the phone anywhere. She ran into the living room, searched the bookshelves and lifted the cushions of the sofa, but found nothing.

Erin could feel her heartbeat in her ears. She turned to face the door again, and saw the phone lying with the two remote controls in front of the television. The phone screen was blank, just like the one upstairs. She carried it into the kitchen and returned it to its cradle. A logo of an empty battery appeared on the screen.

If something had happened to her, she would not have been able to call for help. She had been completely cut off.

After a few minutes, the phone started ringing.

‘Hi, Mum.’

‘I can’t get through to your mobile,’ she said.

‘I…it broke.’

‘What did you do to it?’

‘Nothing. It broke. Phones break.’

‘Why didn’t you pick up your landline, though?’ she said.

‘I was…in the shower.’

‘For forty minutes? Because I’ve been trying to get through for forty minutes. I was starting to think something had…you know.’

‘Yes. For forty minutes.’

‘Or perhaps you were just ignoring me?’ She put on a sweet-sounding voice, and Erin cringed.

‘I’m sorry, I just didn’t hear it upstairs.’
‘That’s no good, Erin. You need to be reachable, a woman alone like you. What if it was an emergency?’

‘Is it?’

‘No, but it might have been. Pick a sturdier phone this time – one that won’t, ah, break.’

‘It was sturdy, it was just something in the –’

Erin heard Mum sigh in the way that suggested she was bored of listening, as though she was standing in a long queue.

‘Sorry, Mum. What did you call about?’

‘Heard from Rhys.’

‘Oh, yeah?’

‘You know when people know they’re wrong, but they’re so afraid of being caught out that they get really aggressive? Do you know what I mean?’

Erin frowned. Nothing her Mum had just said made sense to her. ‘Yes.’

‘That girl you were friendly with in primary school – Sarah – she was a bit like that, wasn’t she?’

‘Not at all.’

Mum clicked her tongue against her teeth. ‘No, no, I remember. Perhaps you were too young to notice.’

‘What’s your point, Mum?’

She was silent for a moment, stunned by her daughter’s bluntness. ‘Oh, well, I was just going to say that this teacher – and I use the word loosely – is really giving it to Rhys.’

This again, Erin thought. ‘What’s happened now?’
‘Don’t sound as though you’re sick of hearing about it, Erin. This is serious.

What if he loses his job?’

‘Who?’

‘Rhys! For God’s sake, Erin, what’s the matter with you?’

But Erin still could not tell her. Not about her lack of sleep, and certainly not about what had happened at the canal.

Her mother got tired of waiting for Erin to respond. Her voice was clipped, now, and professional. ‘That man is at fault, and he knows it. He’s threatening to accuse Rhys of poor management, negligence, you name it. The whole camp will come under review, if he has his way.’

‘Has anyone spoken to the boy about it? Or any of the other children?’

‘The senior management at the school may have done that, in the early days. But what sense could you get out of them?’

Erin gritted her teeth. Her hands were starting to shake. She could not take much more of this.

‘Do you know what I think?’ Mum asked, sounding less severe now. ‘I reckon he’s a bit dodgy, this teacher. Unprofessional. Just a feeling, you know. And he’s worried the school’s management team will start turning up all sorts of things once the blame is on him, rather than on Rhys.’

‘I have to go,’ Erin said, swallowing hard. The phone was displaying a warning message about the low battery.

‘What? It hasn’t been ten minutes.’

‘The battery’s about to go on the house phone.’

‘What are you going to do in an emergency, then?’

‘There won’t be an emergency, Mum. I’ll call another day. Bye.’
She cut her mother off mid-word. She felt hot and out of breath. Sweat was prickling her lower back. She went through to the kitchen, and replaced the phone in the cradle.

In bed, she felt jittery as though her muscles were softly buzzing. Her heartbeat prodded her chest and she had to keep sitting up to try to convince herself she was not having a heart attack.

She could still call Bridget from the house phone. The battery would have charged by now. She padded downstairs, but when she picked up the handset she realised she could not remember Bridget’s number. Where had she put the note? She had not seen it since the night it was pushed through her letterbox, and she could not picture herself putting it away anywhere.

There was a pile of post rammed into a wire holder on her kitchen wall. Was the note there? She shuffled through the papers, but there were only bills and the occasional postcard from Mum and Dad.

She had taken the note upstairs; that was it. She remembered now. She had taken the note to her bedroom. Then what? She searched her bedside drawers. She looked under the bed until she felt light-headed. Opening wide the wardrobe doors, she searched the pockets of coats, cardigans, jeans, and bags she had not used in months. She even rammed her hand inside every shoe.

Her stomach quivered: had she put the note through the wash by mistake? Had it somehow been crumpled up in her sheets as she balled them into the drum of the washing machine? Surely she would have noticed the furry little pills of paper when she shook the clean linen?
Bridget was probably waiting for her phone to ring. Perhaps she thought she was not needed any more. Erin was disgusted with herself; why had she not treated that note with more care?

Erin had kept her bedroom light on, but the silence, the lack of conversation, made her feel guilty and alone. She could not call her from the house phone – she could not remember Bridget’s number and the note it was written on was nowhere to be found.

She spent the night trying to keep afloat of the waves of panic that rolled into her. She did not sleep at all.

The next evening, a thin, fragile new phone lay next to her laptop on the kitchen table. She wanted to get the same model as before, but the shop assistant pushed her into buying something else and she agreed just to make him stop talking. She cradled it like an egg. The screen slowly brightened, displaying the first few words of an email from Dad.

‘Hi Erin. These are the only numbers you might…’

She opened the message, and copied down half the list of phone numbers he gave her.

Later, she sat with her strange phone in her hands, looking at the keypad on the screen. Perhaps Bridget would ring her? No, it never worked that way.

She closed her eyes, typed in what she felt was Bridget’s number, and called. If it was wrong, if an unfamiliar voice answered, then fine. She could not take being separated from Bridget; she would try a thousand combinations if she had to.

‘Erin?’

She sighed with relief. ‘Bridget, it’s good to hear you.’
‘What happened yesterday? I could see you were up, and I was waiting…I thought I’d done something wrong…’

‘No, of course not, Bridget. I’m sorry, I broke my phone, and I –’

‘What’s the matter?’ Bridget asked. Her voice was soft.

‘I fell in the canal. Yesterday. My phone got wet. It stopped working.’

‘Never mind your phone, Erin, are you all right?’

‘I’m fine, I think. It was just…it was like I stopped responding to things. This little boy ran into me and I ended up in the canal. It was like my legs moved before I could stop them, or before I could think about the right thing to do. And I was only there because I’d walked past the usual turning on my way home – I walked straight past it, and I couldn’t even remember until I was really far away from it. I don’t know if I’m going mad or if there’s something wrong with – do you think there’s something wrong with my brain?’

Bridget had been quiet while Erin was talking. She was silent for a few more moments, and all Erin could hear was her own quick breathing.

‘I wish there was something I could do to make you feel better,’ she said, finally. ‘I want you to know that this is normal when you don’t sleep. And your heart is normal, too. You’re young and you don’t have any other health problems. I don’t think this will last forever, but you need to take care of yourself. Forgive yourself for forgetting things or getting confused or angry.’

Erin nodded slowly. She could feel sleep clouding her head. She lay down.

‘But that woman. There was a woman there and she…I pushed her.’

‘She shouldn’t have touched you. It’s all right, Erin.’

The room became muffled and still.
There was a hand on her ankle. Its grip was hard and cold and metallic. Erin bolted upright, tumbling over herself to get away. She stood with her back to the wall, looking at her empty bed. There was no one else with her.

She listened to her breath become slower, and let the wall cool her down.

She picked up her phone. ‘I’m awake again.’

‘Do you still want to talk?’

Erin paused. Her chest had quickly cooled down but her legs felt strange. She tugged at the cloth of her pyjama trousers. It was not quite an itch – more like pressure. It was irritating; she found she could not ignore it.

‘I just need to check something, hold on.’ Taking her phone with her, Erin went to the door and switched on the main light. It was too bright; her eyes stung and started to water.

She reached down and scratched at her shin through her clothes. It did not have any effect. She straightened up, and went over to the window. She could see Bridget’s light, but she must have still been sitting in the chair, waiting for Erin to come back. Even though she had told Bridget a lot of personal things about herself, she did not want her to see what she was doing. She did not want her to ask. She moved to the bathroom.

The light was nicer in there – almost like daylight. White and clean. Now that she was away from the bedroom window, she took off her pyjama trousers. She looked down at her legs, expecting to see some sort of heat rash, but there was nothing marking the skin.

‘Are you still there? What’s wrong?’ asked Bridget. Erin’s phone was balanced on the radiator, and Bridget’s voice was small like a bee bumping against a window.

Alice Vernon
She reached over and talked to her. ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I just feel a bit...’

‘Weird?’

‘I think I’m having a reaction to something. I don’t know. I’m not allergic to anything.’

‘Your voice sounds different, are you in another room?’

‘The bathroom.’

She sat on the floor with her back against the cold wall tiles like she would do when she was sick. It felt nice. A few minutes passed in silence. She could not think of anything to say, so she closed her eyes.

‘Are you feeling ill?’ Bridget asked.

‘My legs feel –’

‘Strange? Are you all right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘It could be exhaustion.’

‘It could be.’

Words were difficult. Erin started to fall asleep. She did not have the energy to move from the floor. She was exhausted, and the bathroom was bright and peaceful. She liked the way the light caught in the dimples in the window. She closed her eyes.

Something was pressing against her legs. Her heart leapt and she was pulled from the brink of sleep. She jerked her knees up to her chin in horror, expecting to see a spider or a moth – something crawling where it should not be. But there was nothing on her. She looked around on the floor, to see if it had fallen off her when she moved. Nothing. She looked up at the light. Then she stood up and brushed her thighs. She shuddered; she could not find whatever it was that had touched her, and that made her nervous.
When she was calm again, Erin found she could still feel it. A creeping tingle on her skin. It must be an allergic reaction. She did not understand what else it could be, since she had not slept it off and she was starting to think that that was what had woken her up. She moved over to the bath and propped her right foot on the edge. She pressed her fingers into the bone of her knee, and then she moved down to her shin. The skin was smooth – there was no sign of redness, no strange marks or swollen patches. But it prickled constantly and Erin could not ignore it. It would not let her ignore it. And the more she thought about it, the more intense the feeling became.

She grabbed her damp washcloth and started to scrub her right leg. The skin was soon blotchy and red. Now it looked how it felt. She did the same with her left leg. She stopped, slightly exhausted from the effort, and she waited. The pressure was still there. Once her skin had dried off and the redness started to fade, the tingling re-emerged like a snail oozing out from its shell. It had not changed.

Erin slapped the cloth against the floor in exasperation. It landed near her phone and she suddenly remembered falling asleep while Bridget was still talking. The screen was dark. Bridget must have hung up a while ago. She got dressed again and went back to her bedroom.

Bridget’s light was out. She checked the time: she had been in the bathroom for an hour. She went to stand by the window, watching for some sign of movement in Bridget’s house. Every room was dark, and all the curtains had been pulled together. Erin felt alone again. Perhaps it was her own fault. She had fallen asleep in the middle of their conversation, and she had not told Bridget what was happening.

Getting back under the duvet made her legs feel worse. She wanted to keep them exposed where she could move them, kick them out, if she needed to. She felt restricted under the covers. She wanted to wriggle out of them. Her heart was beating.
quickly, and she was finding it difficult to breathe with the duvet on top of her. It seemed to get heavier each time she inhaled. She pushed it away, further and further until she could no longer reach it with her hands and then she started to kick it. The duvet slid off the edge of the mattress and folded in on itself. One corner was sticking up at an angle, bending over her feet. From the corner of her eye, it looked almost like a person. She flattened it with her heel.

She could not sleep. She was still agitated, and now she was cold. This was a bad night. Even though she had managed to sleep for a while in the bathroom, she did not think she could settle down again. She wondered if perhaps she should give up and go downstairs. She could find something to watch on television. She could turn the sound down to a mumble and just look at the colours the screen made on the living room walls. It might distract her. She could not stop focusing on her legs.

She got up and walked to the wardrobe to find a thick cardigan she could take downstairs with her. She stopped at the window: Bridget’s light was back on. Erin hurried back to her phone.

‘What happened?’ Bridget asked when she picked up.

‘I fell asleep.’

‘Good for you. You sound wide awake now, though.’

‘So do you. I thought you’d gone to bed.’

She sighed. She sounded sad. ‘I tried. I didn’t know what to do with myself when you disappeared. I went to bed, but I was just lying there, so I’ve come back in here.’

Erin opened the wardrobe door and pulled out an old, heavy cardigan. A few spare hangers fell out and clattered. The loud noise shocked her and she winced as though she had disturbed something.
‘What are you doing?’ Bridget asked. Erin could hear her smiling.

‘I didn’t think you were awake so I was going to go downstairs.’

‘Given up on bed tonight?’

She looked back at her bare mattress rippled with creases, and at the mass of duvet on the floor. ‘My duvet was annoying me.’

Bridget thought for a moment. ‘Have you got a few blankets? They’ve worked for me in the past. Duvets can be so…’

‘Heavy – yes!’ she said. ‘It felt really heavy, like someone –’

‘Go and pile up some blankets, then, and get back into bed before you get cold.’

There was a cupboard shelf full of blankets in the spare room. Old ones from Mum; Erin did not think she had ever bought a blanket herself. She took out three and carried them back to her bed, and then she dragged her duvet and stuffed it into the new cupboard space.

Lying on the mattress again, she started to wind herself up in the blankets. She took the smallest first – polka dot with a hole in the corner – and she scrunched it between her knees. The other two were huge, and she tangled them around her and tucked them under her back. Her bed looked more like a nest, now. She could feel the fabric tight across her chest, but it was different to the duvet. She felt secure, not choked. Her hands moved up to grip tightly the blanket that covered her shoulders. It felt natural to hold it there. She knew that no one could wrestle the blankets away from her. Only she knew how to peel back the layers.

‘I’m back,’ Erin said.

‘Better?’ Bridget asked. ‘What did you do?’
Erin told her about how she had tangled herself up like a puzzle. She even told Bridget how she had done it, and which bit to tug in order to find her underneath.

Bridget laughed. ‘A proper little nest, then.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And your legs?’

She had forgotten about that. Her legs were wrapped securely in a swirl of wool, with the small blanket crushed between her knees; the sensation of warmth and safety was stronger than the lingering buzz on her skin.

‘Why don’t you try and sleep,’ said Bridget. Her voice was quiet and far away.

Erin tried to think of something else to talk about, but she was too tired.

Erin’s skin seemed normal when she woke up, and she got out of bed without paying much attention to how she felt. But she found she was easily distracted that morning. It took her a while to eat breakfast; she nursed the last cold mouthful of tea, not quite ready to convince herself to move again. She was not even thinking about anything in particular. In fact, she was mostly staring at the floor, unable to think.

When she saw her flannel on the bathroom floor, she remembered the way her skin had tingled in the night. The flannel was icy cold and heavy with damp when she picked it up. A dark patch of condensation was left behind on the floor, already shrinking into itself. Erin took off her pyjama trousers to see her legs in the daylight, but there was still no sign of an allergic reaction. She bent down and stretched the skin taught over her shins, but she felt and saw nothing.

Her memory of the tingling sensation seemed unreal this morning, as though she had dreamt the whole thing. She found she could not really remember what the tingling had felt like at all, even though she knew it must have been irritating enough
to stop her from sleeping. Her flannel on the floor, the duvet shoved roughly into the other room, and the tangled mess of blankets on her bed all looked like something someone else had done. The things Erin did when she could not sleep, the compromises and performances, did not really make sense to her in the day. Except Bridget. Talking to Bridget made Erin feel less stranded.

Chapter 9

A few evenings later, a man wearing an expensive-looking suit walked into Bridget’s house. The sound of his car door slamming shut caught Erin’s attention; the thud was deeper than Bridget’s car. Erin kneeled on the sofa and gently parted the slats of the living room blinds. He was tall, and his brown hair was beginning to ebb away from the sides of his forehead. He carried a briefcase. Bridget and her husband were standing in the bright hallway, watching the man as he stepped into the house. He closed the door behind him.

His car was big – big enough to block half of Bridget’s living room window. Erin ran up the stairs and over to her bedroom window to get a better view of the house, but she could not see any movement from within.

She looked at her phone, anticipating a message of some sort, but then she felt tight across her chest. The man’s suit worried her. And his briefcase. And his car. He
was different to the normal people she saw walking through town. Except for solicitors, perhaps. Had someone passed away? Bridget would have told her, surely.

Was he an estate agent? Erin put her hand to the wall. Her heart was beating quickly. He was an estate agent. He was looking over the condition of the house, discussing prices, discussing offers to accept or reject. Perhaps Bridget had not told her to spare her feelings, and to protect her sleep. But Erin was angry. Why had Bridget kept it a secret? Why had she answered the phone night after night and talked to Erin if she knew she was leaving soon? Why was she leaving?

Erin took a deep breath, and forced herself away from the window. It was not her business. Their lives only crossed over when the rest of the street was asleep. She went downstairs. She told herself she would not ask. She would let Bridget tell her.

She threw her phone towards the coffee table. It skittered off the edge and dropped onto the hardwood floor. Her heart dropped with it, and she immediately went to inspect the damage. Fortunately, it remained in one piece. That was a stupid thing to do, she thought. But as much as she was angry at herself, she had an urge to throw it again. Really throw it, this time. She put it on the sofa instead, squarely in the middle of one of the cushions, and then she went to the kitchen and closed the door.

She paced around the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards for no reason, boiling the kettle and then forgetting about it. She needed something to do, but she could not focus and she could not calm down. Where was Bridget going? Was it far? Was she moving house because of Erin?

Ten minutes passed. She sat down and fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, with her nails, with her hair; she could not keep still. He was in Bridget’s house, probably running his hand over the kitchen surfaces, inspecting the grouting in the corner of the
shower, taking photographs of the bed. She knew Bridget’s house would be spotless, and another couple or family would move in within a few months.

It could not happen. She could not lose Bridget. She needed Bridget; she needed someone else awake with her.

She went back into the living room and turned on the television. Warm voices and a violin came quietly through the speakers. She found the remote and turned up the volume louder than she had ever set it. She watched the numbers flick closer to one hundred, and the voices started to buzz and distort. She threw the remote on the sofa and opened the living room window, then ran upstairs and opened the bedroom window, too. Cold air moved through the house, but she did not care as long as the noise of the television was going out into the street.

An advert break started and Erin could feel the garish sounds under her feet where she stood in the bedroom. She ran downstairs to the kitchen bin. She pulled out a brown apple core and a fistful of tissues, and scattered them on the living room windowsill. She went back and lifted out the bin sack, loosely knotted it and left it outside her front door.

A woman walked past and peered in at the television blaring to an empty room. Her eyes flicked down at the rubbish on the window sill. Erin was hiding out of sight in the kitchen doorway, but she could see the judging expression on the woman’s face.

The man was still inside Bridget’s house. Could they hear Erin’s television? Probably not, but he would be able to hear it when he came outside. And the noise would attract his attention to the bin sack on the doorstep and the mess on the window. He would ask them to lower the price, and Bridget and her husband would
disagree. It would be a while longer before the ‘For Sale’ sign appeared above the
door, and maybe Erin would have convinced Bridget to stay by then.

She was starting to get a headache from the noise. It was nearly five o’clock.
How long did these meetings take? Surely he would need to finish soon, to go back to
the office to drop off the paperwork before going home.

Three loud bangs on the wall to her left made her jump. She could feel her
pulse in her throat and her stomach was shrivelling in on itself. She turned the
television down. But she was still self-conscious, so she turned the television off
altogether.

Her ears rang with a high note. The silence made her quick, shallow breaths
seem unusually loud. There were no more heavy thuds against the wall.

Half an hour later, the man’s car was still parked outside. She was still
standing near the window, watching, ignoring the ache in her legs. She would stay
until she saw him come outside.

The sky darkened into evening. Erin had given up standing and was sitting
sideways on the sofa, resting her chin on her knees. She was desperately hungry, but
the man was still there and she did not want to risk missing him leave.

What if he was not an estate agent? Who else could he be? Who else would
stay so late, and for such a long time? A lawyer? She tried to think about what sort of
trouble Bridget could be in, but nothing seemed to fit. Could he be related to Bridget?
Could he be Bridget’s son? She had never mentioned him to Erin, but perhaps there
were complications in their relationship that Bridget could not talk about.

Eventually, Erin forced herself to get up and make dinner, and even managed
to read for a while without glancing at the man’s car every few minutes.
She went to bed while Bridget’s house was still lit up. It did not feel right, seeing her living room still bright at nearly eleven o’clock. But she did not know what else to do; the image of the man’s briefcase disappearing into the house was all Erin could think about. He had thrown her off course. She thought that if she tried to go to sleep, if she counted or remembered something from years ago, then maybe she would be able to forget about Bridget for tonight. Perhaps she could sleep without her.

He was so tall. She remembered the way he seemed to fill the doorway, to block it. Bridget’s house seemed less empty, now. Erin knew there were new conversations happening in there, and that Bridget’s evening routine would be different. How would she manage to sleep while someone else was in the house? Then again, Bridget seemed like she had not slept properly for a long time. If anything, she would probably be worrying that he was not sleeping well; she had not brought out the right duvet or that she should have bought new pillows after all.

Erin thought about his car again. It was expensive and polished and out of place. She had never seen it before. She had never seen him before, either. Was this the first time he had visited in years? That would make it awkward. There would be things Bridget wished she had said, or had not said. Things neither of them mentioned. She would be churning it over and over in her mind and wishing Erin would call so she could talk to her. Perhaps she would still talk to her tonight, she thought.

Erin tried, but she could not sleep. It was only midnight. Nothing felt right, though. Her eyelids were not getting any heavier and she was restless. She just wanted to look out of the window, to see if Bridget was there. She had to check. Bridget might have been waiting.
She got out of bed and walked straight to the bathroom, ducking her head so she could not see whether the light was on across the street. She turned on the cold tap, held her hair and leaned into the stream of water. Mum used to nag at her for drinking like that. A chill drop hung from her chin and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. She walked back to her bedroom, exaggerating a tired squint and running her hand through her hair so it seemed like she had not got up just to see Bridget. Then, as casually as she could, she turned to look out of the window.

He was looking back at her.

Her hand dropped to her side. He was gripping the windowsill and peering out at the street. At Erin’s house. But they caught each other’s eye and he was the first to back away, crumpling in on himself like a paper fan and disappearing out of view. The light in that room was brighter than usual.

Then he came back. Erin thought he knew she was still there because he did not look at her; his head was bent down. He pulled the curtains closed. Now Erin could not see into the room at all. And Bridget was not in there.

Erin left her curtains open. Just in case. Bridget might have been able to see her. From another room.

Was he ashamed? Did it embarrass him, seeing her?

She got back into bed and tried to sleep, wrapping the blankets tightly under her chin until she could feel her pulse through her fist. From the darkness behind her eyelids, she could still see the way he had held the windowsill. He had seemed huge, much bigger than Bridget when she stood in the window. And then he had disappeared when he saw Erin.

Her legs were tangled. The pyjama trousers had wound themselves around her shins like flannel snakes. She let go of her handful of blankets and tried to free
herself. But it still felt tight. The blankets were too heavy, suddenly. And the longer she lay there, the more it seemed as though she would not have been able to get up even if she had wanted to; she would not have been able to find her way out of all that suffocating fabric.

Her heartbeat felt sticky and elastic. It was butting against her chest and it hurt. She could not calm down. The more she realised she could not calm down, the more her ribs seemed to collapse inward. She threw the covers off her body but it did not make a difference. She wanted to call out, but there was no one to help her. She did not know what to do. She wanted someone with her.

She staggered across the room and switched on the bedroom light. It stung her eyes, but it shrugged off the dark and she started to feel better. She stood with her hand on the switch, clinging to it, and she waited for her heart to settle.

She went back to the bathroom where the light was brighter. Bright and clean. She gripped the sink and stared down into the hole of the drain. She told herself that she was not panicking – it was just another symptom of not sleeping. Her heart had not felt as bad as that before, though.

She started to shiver in the bathroom. She crept onto the landing and peered through her open bedroom door. The light in Bridget’s room was out, now. The window looked soulless and dead. It looked hostile. Erin drew her curtains closed and went back to bed, but she left her bedside lamp on – not because she thought Bridget might see it, but because she did not want to be alone in the dark.

She closed her eyes and opened them again. She lay on her back but then rolled onto her left side. She sighed, and shifted onto her back again. She was too restless to sleep. She could not do it, not without Bridget. She thought that Bridget
might still be awake, but she did not know for sure and that agitated her. She could not call unless she had seen a sign that Bridget was awake with her.

Erin tried to count, picturing the numbers like birthday balloons in her mind, but the higher she counted the more anxious she felt about not sleeping. Then she gave up and instead followed the patterns behind her eyelids. But she kept seeing his shape leaning against the windowsill, and that made her open her eyes again.

She turned onto her right side, tucking her hair behind her ear as securely as she could. She told herself not to move again. She would not open her eyes for anything. Not for any alarm or siren. Not even for a knock on the door. Not even for footsteps coming up the stairs.

A lock of hair came loose and fell across Erin’s forehead. She thought of long fingers pulling and she sprang upright, gripping her pillow. Her head felt distant to her body and the room was moving around her. She gritted her teeth and tried to steady herself.

It started as a light prickle on the top of her head like little spots of rain. She ran her hand through her hair, but the sensation did not go away. It was the same problem she had had with her legs; the same irritating tingle. She got up and went back to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, she started to lift up pieces of her hair, exposing the pale lines of her scalp. There was nothing to see, but the feeling of something moving over her head remained and it felt very real.

She went back to bed – she had thought about stepping into the shower to ease the tingling in her hair, but decided it would only wake her up even more. She felt far away from sleep; it seemed like an impossible task now. She lay awake and alert long enough to hear the first of the morning’s birds calling from the rooftops along the street.
He stayed for two more nights. Erin did not sleep for more than three hours each night. Her eyes were like hot coals in her head. She became forgetful and would frequently spend several minutes in a daze of confusion, not knowing what she was doing and completely losing her train of thought. The sight of his car in the street filled her with hatred each time she looked out of the window, and once she even caught herself half-dreaming about running her house key along its doors.

Three days later, she heard a car door slam outside. She had just arrived home from work and was sitting at the kitchen table and holding a cold washcloth over her sore eyes. The noise made her flinch, and she quickly got up to see what was happening.

Through the gaps in her living room blinds, she saw the man lifting a large gym bag into the boot of his car. Bridget was standing near the open front door, watching him and hugging her arms against the cold. Erin thought she seemed sad. He said something to Bridget, and she turned to the house, peering into the hallway. A moment later, the husband appeared. The man waved at them both, they waved back, and then he got into his car and roared away out of sight.

He was gone. Erin went to the sofa and dropped into it. She tucked up her legs against the far side and lay back so it cradled her. It seemed as though the tension of waiting for him to leave had been holding her up against her exhaustion. And now that he had left she felt incredibly weak.

She woke up an hour later breathless and afraid. The living room was dark. She heaved herself up and began to fill the house with light. She had been dreaming about the woods again. But this had been different. The trees were reaching down
towards her, close enough to get tangled in her hair, and when she batted away the branches she was horrified to touch what felt like skin.

She came into the kitchen and turned the tap. Water hammered down into the sink. She put her hands into the stream; it was cold. She flexed her fingers under the water and scrubbed her fingernails with her thumb. She felt strange. Unpleasant. It was not guilt, but it was close. It squirmed in her stomach and prickled the skin around her shoulders just below the surface. Her hands began to feel numb.

As soon as she went into her bedroom, she saw Bridget in the window. Bridget seemed to be moving furiously, and when she turned, Erin could see that she was shaking a pillow out of its white cover. She stayed where she was for a moment, and tried to gauge the expression on Bridget’s face. She watched as Bridget, now a little red in her cheeks, threw the pillow out of sight. Then Bridget, too, disappeared. But the light was still on.

Erin started to get ready for bed. When she came back from the bathroom, Bridget was moving back and forth past the window, pausing every few seconds to lean into something further in the room. Erin walked past the window and turned on the lamp.

Still awake an hour later, she reached out for her phone.

‘Erin,’ Bridget said. She sounded tired. ‘I need to apologise.’

‘It’s okay.’

‘No, it isn’t. I would have told you if I had known – he only told me he was coming when he’d stopped at a service station on the way here.’

‘He’s your son?’

‘Yes. Although we rarely see him these days.’

‘I’m sorry.’
‘It’s all right,’ Bridget said, sighing. ‘I suppose I should be happy that I saw him. But I wish I’d had the chance to tell you. Have you been sleeping?’

She felt she needed to be honest. ‘No. It was bad. I thought he might have been…’

‘An estate agent? He’d be mortified if he knew that was what he looked like to other people. No, he works for a law firm down in London.’

‘It afraid…it made me afraid to sleep, with him in that room instead of you.’

‘I really am sorry. We had to put him in here – it’s the only other bedroom. You were –’

‘Afraid,’ Erin said. ‘We made eye contact on the first night. He was looking out and it just – I’ve been feeling strange again.’

‘Strange? Like your legs?’

‘Yes, but this time on my head. In my hair. Like something’s pulling it, kind of.’

‘Perhaps you should tie back your hair when you sleep.’

‘Maybe. But it’s better now he’s gone. Now that you’re back.’

‘Well, hopefully there won’t be any more surprises. You can go to sleep now.’

‘Are you sure?’ Erin asked.

‘Yes. Go on. I’ll be awake if you need to talk. I doubt I’ll sleep tonight – I still haven’t recovered from his whirlwind visit.’ She paused, and when she spoke again her voice seemed close in Erin’s ear. ‘Everything’s fine, Erin. Close your eyes.’

Erin relaxed, then, and fell asleep a few minutes later.

But she woke up again with a jolt. It was still dark and deathly quiet. She checked her phone; it was not quite five o’clock in the morning. She groaned and
rubbed her eyes, then went over to the window. The house was dark – Bridget must have gone to bed.

Something creaked loudly downstairs. A wave of panic crashed through her. She stood still, not breathing. She thought of the old man in the children’s section, and then of Bridget’s son – of the shape of him in the window. He was not in her house. There was no one in her house except her, she knew. But she could not shake the anxiety that someone was where they should not be.

Just to make sure, she went onto the landing and turned on the light above the stairs. Slowly, she descended. The kitchen and living room were both empty, and the front and back doors were securely locked.

She was suddenly reminded of when Rhys came to stay with her at university. It was during her second year; he said he wanted to check she was surviving, but it seemed like he just wanted an excuse to get excessively drunk. She lived in a musty-smelling house with two other girls and a boy.

On the night Rhys arrived, he insisted on going out. He enjoyed himself more than the rest of them – Erin could tell her friends found him too boisterous. But she was grateful that they agreed to help her show him the nightlife.

Before too long, he was not able to walk in a straight line. He was loud but incomprehensible, and his head lolled every few seconds like a broken toy. The four of them carried him home again, and then they settled on the threadbare sofas in the living room and talked. After a few glasses of water, Rhys perked up again.

They were just starting to talk about going to bed when they heard a loud noise at the front of the house. Without a moment’s hesitation, Rhys jumped to his feet, wobbling slightly, and ran through the living room door. Erin and her housemates followed after him.
The front door was open, and a cold wind whipped through the corridor, carrying the sound of revellers.

There was a male student leaning against the wall by the stairs. His hand was outstretched and fumbling, and then it latched onto the wooden knob at the end of the banister. With his other hand, he was wiping his mouth and eyes.

Rhys became suddenly aggressive. He charged towards the boy, yelling and swearing at him.

The boy looked up; his eyes were wild. He took a step away from Rhys and slammed his shoulder into the wall. The boy stumbled; his phone fell out of his pocket and the battery burst from the back and skittered across the floor. And still Rhys was shouting at him.

Erin tried to calm Rhys down, but he was strangely ferocious. He then grabbed the boy by the shoulders, turned him around and heaved him back through the open front door.

‘Mate, this is my house,’ the boy said in a slurring, high-pitched voice. ‘What’re you doing? Mate, I live here.’

Rhys pushed the boy outside, and then he stood like a wall in the space of the doorway. Erin gathered the bits of the intruder’s phone and she jabbed her brother in the back with the battery.

‘Give him his phone back,’ she told him.

The boy was significantly smaller than Rhys, but he still tried to push him out of the way. He was too drunk to make any impact, however, and Rhys remained unmoving. When Erin came up behind her brother, he sighed, and passed the boy the pieces of his phone.

‘What’ve you done to it?’ he shrieked.
‘You dropped it,’ Rhys said. ‘This isn’t your house.’

‘I let myself in, though, didn’t I?’ He patted his pockets and brought out a bunch of keys which immediately slid out of his fingers and crashed onto the doorstep. He went to pick them up, lost his balance, and headbutted Rhys in the stomach. Rhys pushed him back and he flopped against the bonnet of the parked Land Rover behind him.

Rhys picked up the boy’s keys. He was about to give them to him when a group of loud students appeared at the top of the street.

‘Rory!’ one of the boys shouted. The rest of the group began to shout his name, too, so that together they sounded like yapping dogs.

The first boy approached the house, looked at the bulk of Rhys’s body, and threw his hands up in apology. ‘Sorry, it’s his birthday.’

‘He got into my sister’s house.’

The group barked with laughter.

‘He doesn’t live anywhere near here,’ the boy said.

Rhys raised his shoulders and made himself seem even bigger. ‘Do you know where he lives, then?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then take him home. Take these as well.’ He gave the boy the keys. ‘He keeps dropping his stuff.’

‘Thanks. Sorry. Come on, Rory.’

A few more from the group came to help him carry the boy named Rory. He dangled uselessly in their arms. Laughing, they half-dragged him down the street and disappeared down an alley. Rhys stood until he could not hear the group any more, and then he joined Erin and her housemates inside.
She turned around. Her friends stood in silence. She shrugged an apology as Rhys busied himself inspecting the door.

‘How did he get in?’ Rhys demanded, his voice still loud. ‘It locks when you close it.’

‘It’s…it’s warped a little bit, so you have to slam it,’ Erin explained. ‘Otherwise it sticks.’

Rhys opened the door again, and pushed it lightly. There was a squeak of wood against wood, and the door was stuck before the lock could click in place.

‘Don’t tell me this has happened before.’

‘At the start of the year,’ one of the girls said, and Erin gave her a furious look.

Rhys then slammed the door hard enough that the letterbox banged on itself.

‘You need a new door,’ he said. ‘Call your landlady tomorrow, or I will.’

They all went to their rooms after that; Rhys was sitting on Erin’s desk chair looking miserable.

‘I’m sorry I got angry,’ he said. His voice was quiet. ‘It’s just…well, he could have been anyone. Anyone could’ve walked through, and…what if you’d all been in your rooms or something?’

‘It’s fine,’ Erin said. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

He put his hands through his hair. ‘I’m still quite drunk, actually.’

‘I know. You’re an emotional drunk.’

He laughed. ‘I am. I’m sorry.’

‘Go to sleep.’
In the morning, Rhys squinted at Erin in confusion when she told him she had called the landlady about the door. She then reminded him of the boy, and Rhys laughed and said he barely remembered anything about what had happened.

Erin thought about him now with a dull ache deep in her chest. That was one of the last times they had done anything together. Perhaps that had even been the catalyst for their separation; that they had both been embarrassed by the way Rhys acted and then they started to talk less frequently. But perhaps it would have happened anyway – the distance between them – because as they got older it was more difficult for them to understand each other.

Erin wondered what Rhys would have done if his neighbours had been loud, like next door’s boys a few nights ago. Would he have been aggressive like that time at university? No, he was generally calmer now.

She checked that the front door was locked one more time, and then she went back to bed.

Erin fell asleep on the sofa again the following evening. But it was not for very long; the noise of an alarm suddenly bit into her dream and dragged her out of it. She woke up, head sore from resting it against her knuckles. Her arm ached when she stretched it out in front of her. Groggy, she rubbed her face and checked her phone. Only half an hour had passed. Her doze must have come on suddenly; she could not remember feeling like she might fall asleep. It was occasions like this, when sleep happened so effortlessly at odd hours in the day, that frustrated her the most.

The high-pitched alarm was outside, and it was close. Close enough to wake her. That in itself was enough to anger her, but it seemed as though it would continue
to ring out for some time. A few minutes passed and Erin stayed on the sofa, listening out for the sudden silence that would fall on the street, but it did not happen.

It started to make her anxious. The alarm was relentless, but the rhythm of each squeal seemed to change if she shifted her attention, and then it began to sound like words. In her exhaustion, it was enough to make her feel like she was going mad. She wondered, then, if the alarm had already been turned off and it was now stuck forever in her mind. How would she be able to tell the difference?

She had to find out where it was coming from. She grabbed her jacket from the kitchen and opened the front door.

The noise was suddenly much louder, made worse by the cold wind blowing down the street. But at least she knew it was real as she stepped out of her house.

There was a dry crack above her and she looked up. The boys from next door had opened a bedroom window and the taller of the two was leaning out.

There was another noise behind her. A door.

A woman’s voice asked, ‘Which way is it, can you see?’

Erin turned. Bridget was out on the pavement with her husband. She was wearing a large pink anorak and still had slippers on her feet. She wandered away towards the main road while her husband stayed in the open doorway. Erin could not help looking inside. She could see a neat line of shoes against the skirting board, and a painting of a castle hung on the wall above them.

‘Do you know where it’s coming from?’ he asked. He was looking at Erin.

At the sound of his voice, Bridget turned and walked back to him, and now she was looking at Erin, too.

Erin could not answer.

‘I’d say it’s down that way, wouldn’t you?’ Bridget asked.
‘Ah. Yes.’ Erin swallowed hard, embarrassed.

Bridget leaned out and looked down to where the street curved. ‘House alarm, I think. Someone’s probably gone on holiday.’

‘It’s annoying, wherever it is,’ the husband said, rubbing his forehead. ‘I won’t be able to sleep if it carries on.’

Erin wanted Bridget to look at her then, to twitch her head in annoyance and roll her eyes. She imagined it, being able to share that secret, that mutual understanding, in front of other people. But Bridget did not meet her eye. Instead, she muttered something about calling the police and followed her husband back into the house. She did not even turn to look when she closed the door.

Suddenly the alarm seemed much worse. It seemed solid, like wiry bristles scrubbing the front of her skull. The boys were still at the window next door, mimicking the alarm. She quickly went back inside and slammed the door behind her.

The noise was inescapable. She paced through the house but it did not make any difference; she could still hear it wherever she went. Defeated, she returned to the sofa and switched on the television, flicking through the channels until she could find something that would block out the alarm. She settled on an action film that was already in progress, and let the screeching cars and gunshots ring out in her living room.

At eleven o’clock, the film finished and Erin switched off the television. The house was quiet. She listened for a moment, suspicious of the silence. The alarm did not start again. She checked that the front door was locked, then the back door, then made sure the oven and hobs were off, turned out the lights, and checked the doors again before going upstairs.
Coming back from the bathroom, Erin hesitated in the doorway to her bedroom. She could see through her window to the houses opposite; Bridget was in the spare bedroom, holding a phone to her ear. Just as in the street, Erin felt a wave of embarrassment. She hurried forwards and closed the curtains.

Her pathetic reply to Bridget and her husband replayed over and over in her head. She wished she had said more, something confident or funny, something Bridget might now be telling the person on the other end of the phone. But she also wished she had not gone out at all. It was not how she imagined it would be. It felt strange.

She closed her eyes.

‘Are you angry with me?’

‘No,’ Erin muttered, the sound of her own voice bringing her back from the edge of sleep. The last thing she remembered was a sense of regret for closing her curtains; she did not know when she had begun to speak to Bridget.

‘I think you are. A little bit.’

Erin could hear her more clearly now, but her voice was deeper than usual.

‘It’s just that we talk so easily like this,’ Bridget continued. ‘I felt…I felt embarrassed to say very much to you. I thought you wouldn’t want to know me when you weren’t trying to sleep.’

‘I felt the same,’ Erin said. ‘Your husband spoke to me and I couldn’t respond and I suddenly felt shy. I haven’t felt shy like that for a long time.’

‘Oh,’ she said, chuckling softly. ‘He’ll talk to anyone about anything, trust me. He didn’t upset you?’

‘No. It was just unexpected. Seeing you – it was unexpected.’

Bridget sighed and did not say anything.
'I saw you on the phone,' Erin said.

‘A neighbour,’ she said. ‘She could hear it, too. Wasn’t it awful?’

‘I’m glad it’s quiet now. Did you find out what it was?’

‘No. We called the police. They must have sorted it, somehow.’

‘You called the police?’

‘Not the emergency number,’ said Bridget. ‘But yes. Perhaps we should have done it earlier, in case it was actually a break-in.’

‘What if it had been my house?’

Bridget laughed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘If my house alarm was going off, what would you do?’

‘I’d call the police.’

‘Straight –’

‘Straight away.’

‘But what if something else happened. What if it didn’t go off, or someone disabled it?’

‘How would they disable it?’ she asked.

‘With a screwdriver. Or something. Wire clippers.’

‘You’ve been watching too many bad films, I think.’

‘But what would you do?’

She heard Bridget exhale sharply. ‘What are you worrying about?

‘Nothing.’ Erin turned over. ‘I was just asking.’

‘I’d know if something happened. I’m always looking out for you.’

Erin’s closed eyelids prickled. She scrunched her face into the pillow, feeling for a moment the way her breath became close and thick. ‘I’m going to sleep now.’

‘But are you still angry with me?’
She did not respond. She tried desperately to think of other things, to let her mind wander in any other direction, and Bridget did not say anything else.

Erin did not sleep at all that night. She tried to keep talking to Bridget, but she could not frame her thoughts properly and Bridget did not seem to know how to reply. In the end, Bridget must have ended the call, or maybe Erin did. She lay awake, scrunched up with her knees against her chest, almost at the bottom of the bed.
She was nervous and watchful at work the next day. It was as though her body had been tightly wound, and the slightest nudge would send her spinning out of control. She tried to focus on tasks, to relax into the dullness of the day, but she could feel her heart beating rapidly no matter how she tried to calm down. The image of Bridget looking at her in the street kept appearing in her mind, followed by the clench of embarrassment. Why had she looked at Erin like that? As though they were strangers?

She pulled a stack of children’s books from the returns shelf and walked out from behind the desk. The books were odd sizes; some were standard paperback novels, but others were wide and floppy like mats. She had tried to tuck them into the crook of her arms, but she had not organised them very well and she could already feel them slipping. She tried to shift the balance of the books, to get a better a grip on the corners, but they collapsed inwards like a house of cards and fell out of her arms.

‘For God’s sake,’ she hissed.

She took a step forwards and reached down to pick up the books that were now scattered in front of the door to the children’s section. Out of the corner of her eye, something dark and tall twitched inside the room. She tried to ignore it. The shape moved again. Then the smell of synthetic oranges came to her, fierce like a nettle sting.

She looked up.

It was the same as when she saw him in her sleep. The way he stared at her, the way his left hand curled and stretched as he thought; it was the same.

‘You’d make a terrible goal-keeper,’ he said, pointing at the books on the floor.
‘What are you doing in there?’ She straightened to stand. She did not move closer.

He puffed out his chest and smiled. ‘My granddaughter is staying with me, and I’m getting her some books.’

‘No, you’re not,’ she said.

‘sorry?’

‘You’re not, though, are you?’

‘Why are you raising your voice at me? This library is open for everyone, isn’t it?’ He gestured around the room. ‘Why can’t I come in here?’

They stared at each other for a few moments. Then his eyes became wide and he laughed with a heavy wheeze.

‘You think I’m some dirty old bloke, don’t you?’

It felt as though her insides were burning. She wanted to snap something in her hands, to shout until her voice cracked. She could not restrain herself.

‘Yes! I saw you about to…standing by that girl who was asleep in here.’

‘What girl? You’re making things up.’

‘It happened,’ she yelled.

There was a soft knock at the open door. Nicholas was standing behind her.

‘Erin? Everything all right in here?’

The man pointed at her. ‘She’s accusing me of being a pervert.’

She ran her hand through her hair. Her face was prickling with heat. ‘I’m too tired for this,’ she muttered. ‘I can’t. I don’t know what I’m doing. Can you just get him out?’

She moved past Nicholas, not looking him in the eye. She could feel him watching her as she walked to the staff room. It was quiet and cool in there; she sat
down and buried her face in her folded arms on the table. She could hear her pulse
beating in her ears, muffled and crackling like footprints on unbroken snow.

‘Cup of tea?’

She looked up. Nicholas was tangling his fingers in his hair. She nodded, and
he went to wash out two mugs at the sink. He seemed to be able to talk to her more
easily with his back to her.

‘You’re not doing so well, are you?’ he asked.

‘No.’ It seemed strange to admit it to someone who was not Bridget, and she
bit her lip to stop herself from saying too much.

‘Still not sleeping?’

‘No.’

‘Have you seen a doctor?’

‘I don’t want to,’ she began, and was startled by the sharpness of her own
voice. She took a breath and started again. ‘It won’t help. I know it won’t.’

She could feel him looking at her. She traced a shape on the table. The kettle
rumbled, clicked, and fell silent.

‘It might be a good idea to try.’ He put a mug of steaming tea next to her, and
then he sat on the opposite side of the table. ‘I don’t…I don’t mean to intrude or
anything, or tell you what to do. I’m just concerned. As your friend. Well, as your
colleague, too. I don’t want you to get into trouble because you’re not feeling well –
that’s not fair on you at all.’

She blinked quickly and rubbed her eyes. ‘It’s just him. I feel sick every time I
see him in here. Do you know what I mean?’

‘I can’t say I’ve really noticed him before, Erin. What makes you think
he’s…you know?’
‘Do you remember when I told you about the girl who was asleep in that room? He was the one looking at her. He was in there alone with her. He could have done something.’

‘He didn’t though, did he?’

She gritted her teeth. ‘That’s not the point.’

Nicholas looked at her; his eyes flitted as he tried to find the right thing to say. He moved his thumb around the rim of the mug. ‘Perhaps you’d better go home and rest.’

She pretended not to hear him. ‘Why won’t anyone believe me about these things?’

‘I know how tired you’ve been recently. I just wonder if maybe you’re a little more agitated than usual.’

‘I’m not making it up,’ she said. But then her breath seemed to catch in her chest. She felt light-headed, and the sight of Nicholas was drowned in static.

‘Are you all right?’

She shook her head.

‘Why don’t you go home? You’ve got quite a bit of leave saved up – perhaps you should take a few days off.’

‘No, I’m fine.’

He chewed his lip for a moment. ‘I really think you should.’

Quietly, she agreed. As it was now so close to Christmas, Nicholas told her to come back in the first week of the new year.

‘Let us know how you’re doing,’ he said, watching her wrap her scarf around her neck.
He walked with her back to the front desk. The library was almost empty; the man had gone.

The streets were quiet as she walked home. It was not quite twelve o’clock. She went slowly, letting the cold air sting her cheeks. The lights in the shops seemed dim, and their doors were shut against the wind. She looked through the windows as she passed, not really noticing the things she was seeing.

She could suddenly smell oranges. She stopped; her legs locked and tense.

‘You’re out early,’ he said. ‘Get the sack, did you?’

She turned. The man was standing behind her, carrying a plastic bag through which she could see a brightly-coloured box of cereal. He noticed her looking at the bag, and he lifted his hand.

‘For my granddaughter, see? She doesn’t like muesli and it’s all I have.’

She wanted to snatch the bag and stamp on it until its dry insides scattered over the pavement. She imagined herself doing it over and over. But she nodded instead, and turned to walk away from him.

‘Don’t you think you should apologise?’ he called to her back, his voice suddenly high-pitched as though he were speaking to a child.

She walked faster. She could hear him breathing heavily, and his feet slapped the pavement as he tried to keep up with her.

‘Stop following me!’

He was panting. ‘Not until you apologise.’

She felt his hand brush the back of her coat and she stopped and faced him. He was too close, now. The smell of oranges was intense, and it seemed to come from his thickly-knitted jumper. They were the same height, but with his clothes and heavy
coat he seemed to fill the space around him. She tried to make herself bigger but she was breathless and shaking.

He stared at her, then his eyes darted past her shoulder. She looked behind; a young woman with a pram was staring at them, tapping her fingers nervously on the handle.

Erin looked at him again. As calmly as she could, she said, ‘Touch me again and I’ll call the police. Let me go home.’

‘I’ve done nothing to you. Nothing! I didn’t even touch you.’ He was shouting, now, and his face was red. He looked behind Erin. ‘I didn’t touch her, did I? You saw.’

The woman seemed terrified at being suddenly involved. She tucked her head down and quickly pushed the pram away from them.

‘What are you calling the police for when I didn’t touch you?’

Erin felt a fleck of spit land on her cheek. Her skin seemed to erupt around it, and she took a step back. ‘I’m not going to, just let me go home.’

‘Good,’ he shouted. ‘Good, because I didn’t touch you.’

She walked backwards a few steps, as though trying to escape a wild animal, and when she was far enough away she turned and hurried down the street. She paused every few metres to look back, but he was standing still and staring at her.

She took a detour along the side-streets, and came to her house from the opposite side to her usual walk home. Her heart was pounding painfully against her chest. She fumbled inside her bag for her keys. She brought them out, but dropped them with a loud clatter of metal and plastic. The sound seemed to shatter something inside her; she yelled in frustration and kicked the bottom of her front door. Her shoe left a black scuff on the wood.
After her outburst, the street was quiet. She felt as though she was being watched, although she could not see anyone in the windows of the houses. She stood panting heavily for a moment, then picked up her keys and let herself in.

Her limbs felt heavy as though she had just woken up. Her vision was blurred, and a spot to the side of her forehead throbbed enough to force her right eye closed. She locked the door behind her and, still in her coat and shoes, sat down on the living room sofa.

Mum called in the evening. She sounded distracted. When Erin spoke, or when the conversation lulled, she caught snatches of whispered names and numbers.

‘What are you doing?’ Erin asked, finally sick of her muttering.

Mum pretended to be surprised that Erin had heard her, as though she was not aware of the noises she was making. ‘Oh! My Christmas cards.’

‘How are you holding the phone?’

‘I’ve propped you up against the biscuit tin. You sound a bit quiet, though – can you hear me?’

‘Just fine.’

‘My Christmas cards,’ she said again, because Erin had derailed her. ‘Remember when I used to let you help me? It takes me so long to do these things without you.’

‘Yes.’ Erin tasted a bitter memory of envelope glue at the back of her tongue.

‘But,’ Mum continued, ‘you’ll be here soon, won’t you? When are you coming?’

Heat prickled across Erin face. She had been wondering when Mum would ask.

Alice Vernon
'I haven’t decided,’ she said. ‘I’ve just been so –’

‘Busy, yes, but Rhys has promised to come this year. Says he wants a break from it all, bless him.’

Erin wanted to ask if that was what he really meant, but she held herself back. He must need something from Mum, she thought. Money, probably. ‘Is he?’

‘Don’t sound so shocked! I think it’ll be lovely; the two of you together at home again. The four of us. Like when you were little.’

‘Well, when is he coming?’ Erin said, to stop Mum from plunging into a nostalgia she did not want to share.

‘I said you would organise it with him, but you haven’t yet, have you?’

‘You’ve only just told me.’

‘Yes, but you’ve all got mobiles now. And you talk to him on the internet, don’t you? I assumed he would have mentioned it to you.’

‘I haven’t talked to him…about it yet.’ Erin thought Mum would make her feel guilty if she was honest about the last time she had heard from Rhys. Perhaps Mum already knew; he might have told her.

‘But you will?’

‘I will.’

‘Do you promise? Erin? Do it tomorrow, please, and then call me straight after.’

‘I promise.’

‘There’s beds to make, of course. And I’ll need to buy all the food. I’ll have so much to do, so I really do need to know.’

How would she be able to sleep through any of the celebrations? Her heart started to beat with furious irregularity.
‘Erin? I have to go, now. Need to finish these cards before bed.’

‘Yes, right. Bye then.’

‘Call Rhys tomorrow. Bye.’

Erin hung up and immediately called Rhys before she could think about anything else. If she found a way to distract herself for even a few minutes, she knew she would put it off. She thought she would do it while Mum’s voice was still buzzing in her head.

He did not pick up. Erin tried again, and it went to his voicemail a second time. She could feel her confidence slipping through her fingers like sand, so she scrolled down to find another number listed under his name. A landline.

‘Hello?’ he said. His voice sounded as though his face was pressed into a pillow.

‘It’s…it’s Erin.’

‘Sorry? I can’t – the line’s bad.’

‘It’s Erin. Your sister.’

‘Erin? Hang on, let me call you. The phone in the main office has better reception. Can you wait ten minutes while I run across? Cool. Bye.’

He hung up. Erin stared at her phone. Ten minutes passed. She sat down on the sofa and waited. Another ten minutes later, he called.

‘Hi. Has something happened?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Mum told me to ring. About Christmas. Is this a bad time?’

‘Why didn’t you just, like, text me or something?’

‘Could you honestly say you would have replied?’

He paused, then snuffled in agreement. ‘I don’t even know where my phone is. I think I left it in my car.’
‘I just called it; you didn’t answer.’

‘Didn’t hear it. Yeah, must be in the car.’

His voice was thick and crackling, as though foam was pouring out of the receiver. Erin wondered how he lived in Bryn Hen. There was a faint echo from the office. He must have had the whole place to himself.

‘What’s the plan, then?’ he asked. ‘Be quick: it’s quite windy tonight and the lights keep flickering.’

‘Mum said you’re going there to stay. Can you pick me up on the Wednesday?’

‘I’ve got stuff to do on Wednesday, but I’ll drive to your house in the evening if you fix up your spare bed or something.’

‘What? No, just come on Thursday.’

‘What’s the problem?’

She croaked, unable to begin explaining why she did not want him staying the night. She could not understand why he had even suggested it. But she could not tell him anything. She did not want to.

‘Erin?’

‘There’s no point…I mean…’

‘It breaks up the journey,’ he said.

Erin felt the conversation spiralling out of her control. He started listing the reasons why coming on Wednesday evening was a good idea. There was nothing she could say to put him off.

‘Great,’ he said. Then she caught the words ‘bed’ and ‘bring anything’ and the rest was lost in static.

‘Rhys, what did you say? I can’t understand you.’
She heard a few more seconds of broken words, and then the line went quiet. Her arm dropped to her side and she stood in silence for a moment. She was shaking with nerves already.

All she wanted to do was talk to Bridget. It was only just past nine o’clock, but Bridget’s house was dark except for the spare room. The curtains were pulled together tonight – what did that mean? The light was on, but Erin could not see in. She must be there, though, she thought.

She got into bed and called.

‘Have you been talking to your mum tonight?’ Bridget asked.

‘Yes. And my brother.’

‘Your brother? When was the last time you heard from him? April?’

‘April. He called me from the office in Bryn Hen and the reception was awful.’

‘Well, he’s in the middle of nowhere, isn’t he? At that camp, you’re cut off from everything.’

Erin skin tingled in waves up her back and over her shoulders. She shuddered and started to nestle further and further into the blankets.

‘What are you doing?’ Bridget asked.

‘Burying myself.’

She laughed. ‘Why?’

She had never asked Erin that before.

‘What are you doing?’ Bridget asked again. Her tone was serious, now. Erin stopped moving. ‘It’s fine.’

‘It sounded like quite the operation.’
‘It’s fine. I was just getting comfortable. Anyway, Rhys is staying over on
Wednesday.’

Bridget did not answer for a moment. ‘In your house?’

‘Yeah. I’m not happy about it.’

‘He’s coming from Bryn Hen?’

‘Yes, from work.’

‘Do you think he’ll smell like it? Like mud and boiled bed sheets?’

Like bleach and old shower curtains. Erin started to squirm again. She hoped
she never reached the edge of the mattress; she just wanted to keep going further
down the bed. ‘What kind of question is that?’

‘I was just wondering,’ Bridget said. ‘I can hear you fidgeting, you know.
What’s wrong?’

‘I don’t want him to come,’ said Erin, and she was surprised by how childish
she sounded. ‘I won’t sleep if he’s here.’

‘You can talk to me.’

‘I can’t. I don’t think…I just can’t. And then we’re going to stay at my
parents’ house for Christmas. I won’t sleep then, either. I don’t want him here.’

‘It won’t be for long, Erin.’

‘I know, but I just can’t face it.’

Dirty old bloke, don’t you? Dirty old bloke old bloke you think, don’t? You?

She opened her eyes and looked up into his face. His hands were raised as
though he was about to pounce.

‘Sarah!’
Her eyes opened again and she caught the end of her friend’s name still on her lips. Why Sarah? Because it sounded like Hannah’s name? She took a shaky sip of water.

She settled down again, but she could not get his voice out of her head when she tried to sleep. Nonsense words and phrases burrowed into her thoughts, all with his harsh, frothy sound. The more she tried to push it away, the more aggressive his voice became. It made her tremble; sweat chilled on her neck.


The sound of him was chasing her into a corner. I didn’t touch you. She sat up and fidgeted for a few moments with her duvet, concentrating on refrains of songs to make them stick in the back of her mind. I didn’t touch you. I didn’t. She scrabbled in her bedside drawer and pulled out her old earphones. Dirty old. Touch you. The wires were a mess, and she could feel her heart becoming more frantic as she struggled to untangle it. They came loose, although there was a kink near the jack. She plugged it into her phone, put the buds in her ears and found a long video of ambient piano. After a while the music began to soothe her and, tentatively, she lay down again.

When she had calmed down, she stopped the music and pulled out the earphones. Her room was quiet. The man’s voice had gone. She closed her eyes. She felt small and distant, as though she was looking down from a very high place.

Her bed was suddenly illuminated. There was a hand on her pillow. It was an old, big hand; the veins were like rods under the skin.

Erin scrabbled to get away, tangling herself in the duvet and hitting her knee on the floor. She paced heavily back and forth along the sides of the bed, watching for movement.
She turned the light on. Her mattress cover was crumpled. The duvet was
turned over on itself like a wave about to break.

‘Are you awake?’ she asked.

‘Sadly, yes,’ said Bridget.

‘Was it thundering, just now?’

‘What? Are you all right? Did something happen?’

‘I saw…I don’t know. It was like a flash and then there was a hand on my
pillow. His hand. It was old and it had these thick veins.’

‘Erin…’

‘It was on my bed, Bridget. I saw it.’

Bridget sounded concerned. ‘Just a hand?’

‘I didn’t stop to see the rest of him.’

‘And is he there now?’

‘No.’

‘Then it wasn’t real.’

Erin sighed. Her shoulders were painfully tense. She went to the window to
see the light across the road. She pulled the curtains together. ‘That’s not the point.’

‘No, of course not. Erin, I didn’t mean to dismiss it. I’m sorry. I’m tired.
You’ve closed your curtains. I’m sorry.’

She ended the call. Now, instead of the man’s voice, her own words were
repeating like an alarm in her head. It was on my bed, Bridget. She felt sick. It was on
my bed. The voice seemed to get higher and smaller each time. Her fingers were
tingling. She was pacing across the floor as though to stamp out the words.

It was on my bed, Sarah.
She was aware of a noise. At first she thought it was morning and that she could hear Dad on his way to the bathroom, but it was still very dark. Then she smelled the stale cleaning chemicals of the sheets around her. She felt the hard, crinkling mattress that was not her own. She became aware of the other girls in the room – of Sarah sleeping in the bunk above her. The air was still; it was quiet in the dormitory.

But something was shifting. There was something else with them, an outsider, and the room seemed to scream silently around it.

Rustling by the door, and then silence.

Erin had frozen under the stifling duvet. Sweat broke out on her forehead and neck and chilled where it lay on her skin. She remembered what Rhys had told her about the Grey Lady a few days before the trip. She remembered the message Sarah had read out. She could not move. She did not dare breathe. The message on Sarah’s bed said it would come for her. Erin did not have any similar threat inscribed in her bed; she had checked. She had inspected every rung of the ladder, every slat above her head. The Grey Lady would go for Sarah. If she was still, Erin thought, perfectly still, it would not notice her and she would be fine. It wanted Sarah. Take Sarah.

The fabric of the ghost’s gown whispered, and then Erin heard it hesitate. It was watching them. Could it reach Sarah? Would it climb the ladder? Erin pictured the ghost floating up off the ground. If she peeked out of the duvet, she knew she would see the dead lady’s grey toes dangling in front of her face. And then Erin would see hands stretching out and over Sarah who was still asleep, who would never know what had caught her until it was too late.

There was nothing Erin could do. But at the same time she did not want to do anything. If she tried to wake Sarah up, the ghost would go for her instead. Sarah
could have made a fuss and swapped beds with someone, or gone into another hut. Erin wondered how she would tell Sarah’s parents.

Erin’s mattress sank.

She felt the duvet tighten across her feet like a snake coiling around a mouse as a gradual weight pulled at the covers. She wanted to scream but her jaw would not open. Every inch of her body had locked and she was stuck, quiet, eyes closed, wailing for Mum and Dad in her head. The ghost had chosen Erin instead.

There was movement beside her back. Another depression in the bed, but this one was smaller. A hand. It was leaning. The Grey Lady was leaning over her. It was going to suck out her soul, eat her face. Turn her to dust. And Erin was stuck. She could not scream. Why did she have to wake up? Why did she wake up to this?

The duvet started to move, to be dragged away, but Erin was scrunching it hard against her face so that her fingertips were sore. As soon as the lumpy fabric met resistance, the gentle tugging stopped.

Another pause.

The hairs on her head tickled and bent. At first she thought it was her own fear making her hair stand on end. Then, softly, one by one, fingertips touched her scalp. They were strangely hot and damp and they rested there, unmoving, while she fought with herself to make a sound. Any sound she could. But she just lay there. Waiting for teeth and claws to dig into her head. Anything.

There was a noise above her but she could not hear much besides the thumping blood in her ears. The fingers in her hair tensed and Erin knew she was about to die. Then the sound from above came again, but louder. It was Sarah, muttering. There was a sudden rush of cold air on her head as the hand whipped away. Then the pressure of the duvet around her feet lessened. The mattress squeaked a little
as the weight was removed and then another draught blew into the room when the
door opened and closed. The ghost was gone.

Sarah sighed. Was it relief? Was she awake?

Erin gradually unhooked her fingers from the duvet. The fabric was damp and
wrinkled with sweat.

She tried to whisper Sarah’s name but the sound came out broken. She took a
few deep breaths and tried again. Her friend did not answer. She said it louder.

‘Sarah!’

Sarah sniffed. ‘What?’

‘Are you awake? Something was here. It was on my bed, Sarah.’

‘But everyone’s asleep.’ Sarah clicked her mouth a few times, as though her
teeth did not feel right. Then she shifted position. ‘I’m never sleeping on the ground
again. So bumpy.’

When Erin realised Sarah was still asleep she started to cry. Sarah had saved
her, but not intentionally. She was not even awake for Erin to talk to. No one was
awake. Erin’s parents were not here to help her. Not even Rhys was close by. She was
completely alone.

She thought about finding Miss Baxter but she did not want to go out of the
room when the ghost was still around. Perhaps it was waiting for Erin out in the cold,
dark corridor of the cabin. Waiting for her to be by herself. It would not be scared off
a second time. Then she remembered that she had protected herself by holding the
duvet tightly; she burrowed down the bed as far she could go, tucking the covers over
the top of her tingling head. It was far too hot, but she felt safer.
She wanted to stay awake in case it came back. She was ready to scream, to kick out. But she was also exhausted and weak. After a while, she could not keep her eyes open.

Her breath caught in her throat. ‘Bridget.’

‘I’m still here.’

‘I don’t…I think –’

‘Was it a nightmare?’

‘I don’t know. That night at the camp…but I keep seeing the man…I keep seeing –’

Bridget’s voice was clear. ‘Slow down, Erin. It’s all right. Calm down.’

‘There had been something on my bed at the camp, too. And Sarah…’

‘You had sleep paralysis as a child?’

‘I don’t know. It felt –’

‘The same as what you’ve been experiencing now?’

Erin drew her hand across her damp, chilled forehead. ‘Yes. Just as real. Just as –’

‘A strange bed. First time away from your family. Perhaps it made you see things that weren’t there.’

‘Maybe, but…’

‘And all this talk about Bryn Hen is just bringing these memories back, even in the form of nightmares. It’ll go away soon.’

‘Will it?’

‘Yes.’

She bit her lip. For once, she was not comforted by Bridget’s words.
Chapter 11

She was exhausted by Wednesday. She had not been talking to Bridget as much, and she could not focus on sleeping properly. Every time she tried to sleep, she would see or feel something on her bed. Now, on top of not sleeping, she had to worry about Rhys coming, and about staying at her parents’ house over Christmas. She spent most of the day clawing uselessly at the sheets for the spare bed; it took her so long that she did not have time to clean the house. Rhys would not care, anyway. But she was so tired that on a few occasions the need to sleep seemed to freeze her limbs in place.

Rhys had sent Erin a text message in the morning to say he would arrive at around six. He knocked on the door at eight o’clock.

‘Hi,’ he said, dropping his bag on the doormat between them. ‘I parked in the car park around the back. It’s free after five, right?’

‘Right,’ Erin said.

She stood to the side to let him pass. His boots were spattered with mud and she knew it was mud from Bryn Hen. A little cake of it, indented with squares like a waffle, was left behind on the doormat. She bent down to flick it back onto the pavement. When she closed the door, she found a few blades of grass. She was
uncomfortable already. She wanted him to leave, and to take his walking boots with him.

‘The room on the left?’ he called from upstairs. She twitched – she was not used to hearing other people’s voices in her house. ‘Erin?’

‘Yeah. On the left.’ Her own voice seemed feeble in response, like a dissolving cube of sugar.

Erin could hear his heavy footsteps and the sound of shuffling as he unpacked. It was her brother; she knew it was her brother, but the movement upstairs was so strange that it felt like an intrusion.

A few seconds later, he bounded down the stairs two at a time, running his palm down the wall for support.

‘Your bathroom is tiny,’ he said.

He had taken his shoes off now, and his socks were thick and grey. Walking socks for his walking boots. It irritated Erin – did he not realise he was going to be stuck at Mum’s house for days, or did he plan to abandon her?

He opened his mouth to say something, but a car door slammed outside and she turned to the window, thinking it might be Bridget. She was already anxious about how she would sleep while Rhys was in the room next to her.

‘Expecting someone else?’ he asked.

‘Not really.’

‘Hardly a bustling town, this.’

‘You work in the middle of nowhere. The only friends you have are ten-year-olds and even they leave you after three days.’
Erin knew she was too harsh. But, oddly, it felt good. Rhys looked at her as though listing all his retorts in his head. He used to be quicker than this. Instead of speaking, he shrugged. That was not like him.

‘Any chance of tea?’ he asked.

‘Yes – can you take it in a mug or do you need a flask?’

‘What have I done?’ he yelped, resembling a startled dog.

‘Nothing. I’m sorry.’ She was suddenly embarrassed. She stared down at the floor and could not look up.

‘It’ll be fine,’ he said, but he turned his back and moved towards the kettle.

‘Christmas. Everything. We’re both adults.’

‘Only when Mum isn’t around.’

He turned the tap roughly so water sprayed over him. Erin laughed, and it seemed to break something between them; it made them younger. When Rhys looked at her again, he was grinning.

‘Look,’ he said. ‘I’ve got my car. We can sneak out if it gets too much – go for a walk.’

The thought of him leaving on his own made Erin anxious, but now his invitation gave her a deeper sort of dread. She pictured tall trees, steep slopes, a struggle to find something to grasp.

‘I wouldn’t be able to keep up with you,’ she said.

‘I have to slow down to keep pace with kids, remember.’

He was opening and shutting cupboard doors.

‘Cupboard next to the fridge,’ she said.

He shuffled along the counter, opened the right door, and immediately reached in for the pale blue box.
‘Since when do you drink camomile tea?’ he asked, looking at the box from every angle as though to find the answer written on it. ‘Having trouble sleeping?’

‘No.’

‘It stinks,’ he said when he pulled back the lid.

‘It’s an acquired taste.’ She snatched the box from his hand and gave him a tin instead. ‘The normal tea is in there.’

They tried to watch a film after dinner, but every few minutes Rhys would yawn loudly and ask how much longer it would be before the end. Erin was not paying attention to the story, either – she was simply delaying going to bed. At half past ten, she could not stand his yawns any longer.

‘I’m too tired to concentrate,’ Erin said. ‘Do you want to go to bed?’

Rhys stretched his arms out until the bones in his back clicked. He rubbed his eyes with his hands. It felt like he was mocking her, like he already knew his sister was having difficulty sleeping and he was putting on a display of tiredness. He was showing her how easy it was for him.

He clambered to his feet and picked up the empty mugs from the coffee table.

‘I’m going in the bathroom first. I’m the guest. I forgot my toothpaste, by the way, so can I borrow some of yours?’

‘I don’t want it back.’

‘You know what I mean.’

When he closed the bathroom door, Erin went through the process of switching everything off in the living room and kitchen. She did not want him to see her paranoid checking and double-checking of switches and locks. She found the mugs standing in the bottom of the sink, still with the dregs of tea in them. She took them out, rinsed both with water, and left them on the counter.
She was leaning against the landing wall when he eventually emerged from the bathroom. His face was pink with scrubbing and he had a streak of white toothpaste on the old t-shirt he was wearing to bed.

‘Do you have everything you need?’ she asked.

‘Think so,’ he said. ‘That toothpaste is grim.’

‘Is that why you’re covered in it?’

He looked down, and scratched at the stain with his thumb. ‘That was from yesterday. Anyway, I get up quite early. I’ll try not to wake you.’

He disappeared into the spare bedroom and shut the door. She heard the click of the switch as he turned out the light.

What had he meant by early? What time did Rhys think was early? Four o’clock, five o’clock? Erin wished she had asked, or at least told him to wait in the morning until he heard her down in the kitchen. Now she felt on edge. She was under pressure to fall asleep before he woke up again.

He was probably asleep already; she imagined him falling asleep in minutes and dreaming about orienteering signs and a parade of kayak paddles. Part of her had been hoping to see some sign of tiredness or worry in his face – something to match Mum’s melodramatic updates of the ongoing feud with that teacher – and maybe they could have been sleepless together. But he seemed fine. He did not mention anything, nor had he lapsed into silence or anger. Erin’s lack of sleep had settled into the contours of her face, but she could not find evidence of anything similar in his. How was he still all right?

It was uncomfortable to lie there with Rhys in the next room. Erin knew that it was only her brother, but there was something more to the unusual fullness of the
house. She was too aware of him; of another person who was not normally there, who
should not normally be there. Like when someone stood too close to her in a queue
and she could feel their shopping bags or the edge of their open coat brushing against
her back.

She suddenly felt sick. She realised how restricted she was with Rhys there.
Over the last few weeks, she had been wandering through the house at night without
worrying whether anyone would find out she could not sleep. She could not do that
now. If Rhys could sleep then she had to act like she could, too, and that meant she
had to stay still. Pretend to sleep.

She shuddered. Her heart was beating hard against her chest. Something was
wrong; it was worse than she thought it would be. She felt like she needed to run
away.

She pushed the blankets back and got out of bed as quietly as she could. She
knew which floorboards creaked, and she stepped over them so Rhys would not hear.
Earlier, when they had been getting ready for bed, Erin had made a show of pulling
her curtains closed, making sure the rings dragged across the rail so he could see how
eager she was to fall asleep. Now, she gently made a gap in the curtains so she could
peer through.

There were no lights on in Bridget’s house. The blinds were drawn in the
spare room. She wondered if Bridget had seen Rhys standing at the door. Or maybe
she had looked out and seen that Erin’s house was dark. Erin had turned off the light
in her bedroom; she needed to keep it switched off in case Rhys went to the bathroom
and saw the glow under her door.
It was not as though Bridget was waiting around in the dark. Erin could tell she was not awake. If she called, she knew Bridget would not answer. She was alone again.

She got back into bed and waited for Rhys to wake up.

‘Morning,’ he said, when Erin was half-way down the stairs.

She came into the kitchen. Rhys was sitting at the table now littered with dishes. He was just finishing off a corner of toast.

‘I helped myself,’ he said.

‘…see –’

‘What?’

‘I can see that.’ She moved around the table, clearing up his dishes. ‘What time do you want to go?’

He brushed toast crumbs from the stubble around his mouth, ‘I was thinking of going for a walk this morning. Do you want to come?’

‘I told Mum we’d be there by the afternoon.’

‘I won’t be that long. I need to mentally prepare myself for the onslaught of white wine and glitter.’

Erin started to laugh, but she caught herself and turned it into a cough. ‘You’ve wormed your way out of it for the past few years. I have to suffer this every Christmas, you know.’

‘All the more reason why you should come walking with me.’ He got up and went to the stairs. ‘It’ll help you sleep.’

‘I sleep fine, thank you.’
He looked at Erin over his shoulder but did not say anything. Her heart started to beat quickly as though she had been found guilty of something. She did not want him to know about her sleeplessness in case he told Mum or loudly asked Erin about it while Mum was in the room. It seemed like he knew. Was it the camomile tea in the cupboard? The shadows under her eyes? That did not mean anything, surely. Rhys would not have been able to figure it out even if she had left bottles of sleeping pills lying around.

She heard him yawn upstairs; loud and long like a lion’s roar echoing across a zoo. It again occurred to her that he might have the same problem as she did, and that she was wrong to assume he could sleep easily. Erin could not remember if her brother had looked tired the last time she saw him, if the redness around his eyes was new or if he had always had it. Maybe Rhys could recognise the symptoms in her because he had them, too, and they were just trying to keep their sleeping problems a secret from each other.

She could hear Rhys padding around upstairs while she washed the dishes. His footsteps were heavier when he came down again; he was wearing his boots now, and he held a worn-looking backpack in his hand.

‘You’re going now?’ Erin asked.

‘Yeah.’ He raised his eyebrows as though she had said something ridiculous.

‘What’s the quickest way to the footpath?’

‘It’s in the corner of the car park. You know where the pharmacy is? Down by there.’

‘Cool,’ he said.

‘Do you know where you’re going?’
He shrugged. ‘I won’t go far. Just want to clear my head a bit before we set off.’ He swung his bag over his back. It hissed against the material of his raincoat.

‘I’ll, um…I’ll see you later.’

She followed after him, hands covered in suds from the sink. ‘Do you want a key?’

‘What for?’

‘Just in case. I might be…I don’t know.’

‘You’re not going anywhere, are you?’ he said, and slipped out of the door before she could say anything else.

She lowered her arms, letting the foam drip from her fingertips onto the living room floor.

The house settled and expanded after Rhys left, as though it had been holding its breath since his arrival. Erin was aware again of the silence of being alone. It seemed even deeper. She wanted to preserve it; she moved as quietly as she could.

She finished washing up and then immediately went into the spare room. There were signs of him everywhere, from the deep crinkles in the mattress cover to the thick, earthy smell of his deodorant that hung in the air around her. His black holdall, like the charred hulk of an old ship, lay in a shadowy corner. The flap was turned down but he had left it unzipped. She crouched down next to it. There was a streak of dry mud arcing along the side. Carefully, she pulled the bag open. She did not know what she was hoping to find in there, but there was nothing but a crumpled mess of shirts. She patted the contents down with her palm, but it was only his clothes. His grey socks from yesterday, turned inside out so that the straggly innards were exposed, lay next to the bag. A half-empty bottle of water and his deodorant stood on the bedside table.
Erin sat down on the bed. It could have been anyone staying in this room. There was nothing there that she could recognise as belonging to her brother. She lay back until she was looking up at the ceiling. Did Rhys feel the same? As though he could be in anyone’s house?

She thought about his boots and the mud he had left on the doormat yesterday. A wave of nausea lurched in her stomach. Would she come back from our parents’ house and still find bits of grass and soil from Bryn Hen everywhere? She sat up, heart beating fiercely, and looked at the carpet around her feet. She could not find anything; perhaps he had cleaned it up. But she was sure that if she could see closely enough, if she held a magnifying glass to the fibres, she would see little specks of mud.

She bolted out of the room and down the stairs. The vacuum cleaner was tucked in the alcove in the corner of the kitchen, tangled in its own cable and surrounded by junk. She kept her house clean but she did not use the vacuum on the wooden floors downstairs, and it was too much effort to carry it up to the bedrooms. She would do it a few times a year, when she suddenly felt guilty about neglecting it. Otherwise, it did not really bother her. But now it was all she could think about. It was like a reflex action, like running away from danger. She could not do anything else until she was sure there was no trace of Bryn Hen in the spare room.

She did not care about the objects blocking the way, and she wildly threw and kicked away buckets and boxes. They skittered along the kitchen floor, hitting the cupboards and landing at awkward angles. She moved the vacuum cleaner out into the space she had made. It was heavier than she remembered; the wheels were awkward and would not turn like she wanted them to. But the thought of leaving the spare room in its current state was unbearable.
The vacuum was heavy. She had to take the stairs one at a time, dragging it after her and letting the back wheels bump against the edge of each step. She had a sudden image of the crime dramas she had watched, where the murderer clumsily heaves their victim up a flight of stairs. And instead of the wheels, the heels of the victim’s shoes would scuff along the way. The vacuum seemed to get heavier at the thought, and she almost let go.

At the top of the stairs, she did not stop to catch her breath. She was panting as she plugged the vacuum into the socket on the landing; her arms were oddly light as she pulled it into the spare room. Then Erin went over the same patch of carpet again and again. The noise was loud, but she found she liked it. Soon, her arms started to ache. A pain blossomed in the small of her back. She could feel the warmth rising from the body of the vacuum, and a smell of overheated dust. But she kept going, nudging the edge of Rhys’s bag each time she pushed the vacuum forwards.

Her vision began to narrow. She could not breathe, and her arms did not have the strength to carry on. She turned the vacuum off with her foot, feeling the hot plastic under her socks. She realised that she was swaying; she could barely hold herself up. Running her hand along the wall, she stumbled across the landing and into her bedroom.

She had not made the bed yet. She had not even changed out of her pyjamas. The blankets were in the same crumpled mess she had left them when she got up. They had not quite flattened; there was still the dark arch of fabric over the mattress like the entrance to a rabbit burrow. She pulled the blankets up and crawled back underneath them.

When the pain in her arms faded and her breathing became regular again, she found she was still trembling even though she was too warm. She had a corner of
blanket scrunched up in her fist. Erin began to think of all the other places in her house where Rhys’s boots had been. She remembered the way he had bounded like a dog down the stairs; he was wearing them then. And there was probably still mud on the doormat.

She let go of the blanket and rolled onto her back. She followed a crack in the ceiling from one wall to the other. She knew she needed to get up again. Rhys had not taken a key and it would be awkward if he was left stranded outside, pounding on the door while she slept upstairs. Still, falling asleep was an attractive idea. She was at the stage, yet again, where she did not really care where or when she fell asleep, as long as she could wake up feeling a little less exhausted.

The daydream of sleeping through Rhys’s persistent knocking carried on, and like a film she watched as Rhys scratched his head and gently kicked the bottom of the front door. He banged the letterbox and then peered through the window, trying to see her through the cracks in the blinds. Had his sister gone out and not told him? Was she lying in a heap at the bottom of the stairs? What would he tell Mum? He knocked on the door again. A door opened, but it was not hers. Rhys turned around to face a woman standing in the doorway of the house opposite. He quickly explained what he was doing, and at the mention of Erin’s name the woman raised her eyebrows and stepped out on the pavement.

Erin sat up. Her head was swimming. She had to get up and do things; she had to be awake when Rhys knocked on the door.

She spent the morning cleaning and listening to a radio channel whose music annoyed her to the point where she forgot her own tiredness.
Rhys came back just before midday. His cheeks were flushed with red and he smelled like the cold. He took his boots off on the doormat and pointed to his backpack.

‘I got lunch,’ he said.

‘We’re having lunch first? I’m ready to go.’

He pulled out a paper bag spotted with translucent patches of grease. He held it up to her. ‘I’m hungry. Let’s have lunch first, and then we’ll go. It’ll still be the afternoon when we get there.’

They sat at the table and ate their sausage rolls in silence. Rhys was chewing with agonising slowness, looking at his plate like it was a work of art that needed careful consideration.

‘I should call Mum,’ she said.

Rhys was licking flakes of pastry from his fingers. ‘Why?’

‘Because she’ll call me, otherwise. And she’ll be angry.’

‘Send her a text. Say we’re setting off. Soon. We’re setting off soon.’

Erin hesitated for a moment. ‘Are you avoiding it?’

‘No. I just…we’ll go when we’re ready.’

‘And when will that be?’

‘Now.’ He gestured at her phone on the table. ‘Send her a text. Go on. I’ll start bringing the bags down.’

‘Let me do it from your phone; she’ll prefer a text from you.’

Rhys looked at her. His mouth was tight and Erin could see a muscle working in his jaw. ‘She’ll know you’ve written it,’ he said, and disappeared upstairs.

They left the house a little after one o’clock. They piled their bags of clothes and Christmas presents outside the front door while Erin locked up. Rhys made a
show of carrying as much as possible. Erin had not brought more than she could manage herself, but Rhys was now straining to hook gold-coloured bottle bags on the ends of his fingers. The skin was turning white and yellow under the weight.

‘Let me have a few more,’ she said, picking up the two bags he had not yet taken.

‘I’ve got it. Come on.’

She watched him walk ahead for a few seconds. Then she turned to look down the street once more.

Something moved in Bridget’s window. Erin froze, staring up at the glass. Two crows flew overhead. Perhaps it was just their reflection, she thought, and hurried to catch up with her brother.

His car, an old red Peugeot with rust peeling around the seam of the bonnet, was parked in the far corner of the car park. He opened one of the back doors, throwing a crumpled road atlas from the seat into the footwell. He held his arm out behind him and Erin started to hand him bags.

When they were packed, he slammed the door and stood outside for a moment with his hands on his hips, looking up at the hills in the distance. He let out an exaggerated sigh and dropped his shoulders. ‘Okay, let’s go. Get in.’

She could not remember the last time Rhys had driven her anywhere. He took corners too quickly, and something in the back of the car rattled whenever they hit a bump in the road. There was a smell, too, like a damp shed but with something sharper and synthetic underneath.

‘It stinks,’ Erin said.

‘What? Argh – I forgot to take my wetsuit out of the boot. Do you think Mum will let me air it anywhere?’
‘You keep it in the car?’ she said, picturing the rubbery skin crumpled in the darkness.

‘No. I went for a paddle yesterday. Took my kayak out on the lake. I meant to put it back in the drying room, but I forgot. Could I put it in the bath?’

Erin suddenly felt uncomfortable, and she shifted in her seat. The idea of the thing lying in the bath would keep her awake at night. ‘She won’t let you bring it in the house.’

‘It needs drying out. I’ll pin it out on the line. Or maybe it’s too heavy.’

‘Did you check the traffic before you set out?’ Erin asked. She wanted to crack open the window; Rhys was fumbling with the heating dials to turn it up.

‘Hm? Yeah. It looks fine.’

They were silent for a while. She was waiting to see if Rhys would bring up the wetsuit again, and she thought of questions she could ask to distract him. But he did not mention it, although the smell of the clammy rubber in the boot hovered around them.

Rhys coughed. He held the wheel with his right hand, drumming his fingers against it.

‘Can I put on some music?’ he asked.

‘If you want.’

He jabbed a button on the radio, and the screen lit up. He had not set the clock properly. He pressed another button, and then turned a dial. A quick succession of low acoustic guitar notes surrounded us. A man’s voice, soft and American, mumbled over the top. Erin looked at Rhys; he suddenly seemed more relaxed. He had both hands on the wheel, now, and was tapping a slightly off-beat rhythm.
The music annoyed her at first. It sounded hot and dusty and brick-red. It seemed so ironically out of place in the little car trundling past wet Welsh fields. She clicked her tongue when the banjo came in; it seemed like the sort of stereotypical country music her wilderness-roaming brother would listen to. She expected Rhys to take the bait and make a sharp comment, but he ignored her little noises of contempt.

But after a while, the sky began to dim and the back windows became mottled with a thin bloom of condensation, and the warmth of the man’s voice was soothing. It drawled and whispered, and Erin could tell he had a beard. All the songs sounded the same. She melted into them.

Chapter 12

Rhys poked her arm with his finger. It was dark. The music had stopped. The car had stopped. Erin lifted her head. They were parked on the pavement outside the low
garden wall of her childhood home. Rhys opened the door and the light came on above them.

‘You fell asleep,’ he said, and ducked out into the cold air.

‘I didn’t,’ she said, trying not to squint. ‘I was just thinking.’

‘Sure. Can you go and knock? I don’t think they’ve seen the car.’

The light was on in the living room but the curtains were closed. Erin lingered for a moment, fumbling with the zip on her coat to give Rhys time to catch up. Rhys slammed the car door shut, and a few seconds later the living room curtains rippled. A bright gap appeared in the window and then vanished again.

‘Someone saw us,’ Erin said.

‘Who? Was it Mum?’

The frosted glass of the front door was suddenly illuminated. There was the sound of a crack above them, and a bedroom window opened at the same time as the front door. Neither of them knew where to look; Rhys went forwards to the porch while Erin stayed on the path.

‘Hullo,’ Dad called, leaning his head out of an upstairs window.

‘Hi, Dad,’ Erin said.

‘Rhys not with you?’

‘Of course he’s here - they’ve come in his car!’ shouted Mum, stepping one foot out the door and looking up. ‘What are you doing? Come down and say hello to them.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I was joking.’

‘Your bag’s there,’ Rhys said, looking over his shoulder at his sister. He went inside.
Their mother waited for them to come in and then she shut the door behind her. She caught Erin by the arm.

‘And a hug for you, too,’ she said, and pulled her daughter towards her. She smelled like mulled wine. The whole house smelled like it.

Dad was lingering half-way up the staircase. ‘Where’s Rhys gone?’

‘Making tea,’ said Mum. ‘Erin, why don’t you take your bag upstairs? Is that everything from out of the car?’

Rhys’s bags were in a sagging pile next to the living room door. Erin could hear him clattering mugs in the kitchen. Dad went to go and find him; Mum patted Erin on the shoulders, and then left her.

The smell of wine and spices was less powerful upstairs. It was colder up there, too. She turned left, to her room at the front of the house – where her dad had been standing. It was always strange to come back; the layout was so familiar but there was a sense of unreality to it, as though she was walking onto a film set.

She put her bag down by the wardrobe and went to look out of the window. The glass was still chilly from having been opened a few minutes before. The streetlamps had been replaced with new ones; that was the first alarming thing she saw. These were bright and white instead of the softer orange bulbs they used to have. She could see the ghostly glow of them stretching across the ceiling. There was nothing to see at night; past the pavement and the streetlamp, there was a single old cottage with fields surrounding it. Their house was on the outskirts of the village, with the rest of the houses spreading away from them like a wake.

Dad was clawing at the back of the television when she walked into the living room.
‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

Mum answered for him, ‘I want to get my pictures up on the screen. You did it before, come on, Dad.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I can’t remember how to –’

‘Oh, never mind,’ said Mum. ‘Just sit down. Pass it here before you stand on it.’

A thin, black tablet lay dangerously close to Dad’s foot. He retreated from the mess of television cables; his grey hair was sticking up at the side where he had pressed his head into the wall.

‘Nice hair,’ Erin said.

He quickly flattened it with one hand while holding the tablet out to his wife. Mum snatched it from him.

‘Where’s Rhys? Rhys!’ Mum called, while her middle finger swiped furiously at the screen. Her eyes darted as she searched.

Rhys trudged in with a beer in his hand. ‘Bottle opener?’ he asked, cranking his arm against the glass neck in case Dad did not understand what he meant.

‘Oh, just a second.’ He patted his pockets, frowned, then moved to the glass bowl on the bookshelf. He took out his bunch of keys, dangling them by a green metal crocodile with a row of jagged teeth. ‘The old one broke.’

‘Will you sit down?’ Mum barked.

The three of them sat on the sofa – Rhys squeezed in between Erin and their father. Erin could smell her brother’s beer at first, but then she noticed that the strange green odour of his wetsuit had clung to him. And it was on her, too. She turned her head into her shoulder; the smell was in her hair and in the fibres of her jumper.

‘Did you just sniff your hair?’ Rhys asked.
‘Smells like your bloody wetsuit.’

‘You didn’t have to get a lift with me.’ He took a swig of beer. ‘And I didn’t even ask you for petrol money.’

‘Yeah, but you still haven’t paid me back for Mum’s birthday present from ten years ago.’

‘We’re even, then.’

‘Children!’

Erin’s head snapped up, and another waft of the damp rubber smell emanated from around her. The smell of Bryn Hen.

‘Erin, you’re not looking.’

Mum held the tablet with the screen facing them. In the photograph, Mum was standing on a pier, dramatically looking out to sea. Her long, neat nail clacked as she ran her finger across the image, replacing it with another.

‘Who’s that, then?’ said Dad.

It was him, of course, in the same location and in the same pose as his wife in the previous photograph. Rhys soon began to get restless, and out of the corner of her eye Erin could see his left knee twitching up and down. It made the sofa shake.

‘I’ll get travel sick if you don’t watch out,’ said Dad.

Rhys pressed the beer bottle down on his thigh and was still. A few minutes later, however, he started making little rips in the paper label. His fidgeting was beginning to irritate Erin, and she knew that she would not be able to sleep if she went to bed angry.

When their mother reached the last of the photographs, she handed Erin her tablet so that she could ‘look at the photos more closely.’ Then she disappeared into
the kitchen. She was singing under her breath. Erin turned off the tablet and balanced it on the arm of the sofa.

With Mum gone, the living room was suddenly very quiet. Dad started to talk about somewhere he and Mum had visited on their holiday – an old manor house – but he stopped when he realised he could not remember the name of the place.

Then he asked: ‘Why don’t we get the fire going? Shall we get the fire going?’

‘Erin can do it,’ Rhys said, and when she got up he slid sideways like a rag doll until he was half-lying on the sofa.

‘What do I do?’ she asked him.

‘You literally just set it on fire. That’s it.’

Erin knelt on the hearth and opened the door of the log burner. ‘Isn’t this more your thing, Rhys? Lighting fires, eating noodles and a stock cube from an old tin.’

‘Mm, lovely. There’s a spider on that log.’

‘No, there isn’t.’

‘Don’t listen to him, Erin, you’re doing grand. We use these long matches, here. Set a bit of newspaper on fire and sort of spread it around.’

She looked up at Dad. ‘Why do we even have this?’

‘Your Mum thought it was a good idea. Quite a few people in the village have them; you can see the smoke coming out of the chimneys. It’s nice to watch the logs burning, I think. And it does get cosy in here, when you get it going.’

‘Which will be never,’ said Rhys.

‘This is such a pain.’

‘You’ve almost got it,’ said Dad, handing her another piece of knotted newspaper. ‘Put this one round the back. There – you’ve got it! You can shut the door, now.’
Rhys applauded.

‘Move,’ Erin said, and he sat up again.

They did not know what to say to each other then, and the crackling of the logs seemed to make the silence worse. Erin played with her hair, and Rhys drummed his palms against his thighs. He reached into the pocket of his jeans and brought out his phone. The screen said he had a missed call from a name Erin did not recognise. His whole body stiffened.

‘Didn’t hear that go off,’ said Dad, peering down at the phone. ‘Did you hear it go off? Or am I going deaf?’

‘It was on silent,’ Rhys muttered. He bit his lip and his leg started to jerk relentlessly. He made a noise like a growl and then he stood up. ‘I need to call him back.’

He disappeared into the hallway, closing the living room door behind him. A moment later, his voice came soft and rumbling through the house.

‘What’s he saying?’ asked Dad.

Mum appeared with a bowl of crisps in her hand. ‘Where’s Rhys?’

‘On the phone,’ Erin said.

‘Who is it?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Somebody Price.’

‘Price? Oh dear.’ Mum’s face creased, and her mouth was moving as though she was chewing something. She put the bowl between them on the sofa and went to the closed door to listen.

Rhys laughed; Mum leapt back. He spoke for another minute, and then they heard him say goodbye. He burst in through the door.
‘That was Ed – Mr Price – the head.’ He was breathless and grinning.

‘They’ve just held a meeting – you know, about the…anyway, they’re dropping the whole thing.’

Mum squealed and ran to hug him. Dad nodded happily. Erin had to piece it together. She tried to look pleased, but she did not understand enough about the trouble to be as relieved as everyone else. An uncontrollable wave of something – tears, nausea, laughter – rushed up inside her. While her mother was giddily asking Rhys about the phone call, Erin slipped into the kitchen and through to the cold utility room that smelled of washing powder.

Dad soon followed her in. ‘What’re you looking for?’

‘Hm? Oh…just a – nothing. It’s fine.’

‘Everything all right? That’s good about Rhys, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Yeah, it’s great. It’s nice and cold in here.’

‘Are you too hot with the fire? Your face is red, look.’

‘Is it? I was a little bit. I’m okay now.’ Erin shuddered.

‘That’s always the way,’ he said, going back into the kitchen, his voice trailing off. ‘First you’re too hot…’

Mum was sitting next to Rhys on the sofa when Erin came back. She had the tablet in her hand, and they were laughing at something.

‘So why have they dropped it?’ Erin asked.

‘Rhys has just explained this,’ said Mum. ‘Where did you go?’

Rhys looked up from the screen. Erin suddenly realised how pale her brother’s face had been earlier – now he seemed warmer and more animated.
‘It was the parents,’ he said. ‘Ed – that’s the head-teacher of the school – said the kids had teamed up and told their parents that it was Mr Steadman’s fault, not mine. They held a right little protest, he said.’

‘Adorable,’ said Mum.

Erin felt confused. ‘Mr Steadman is…’

‘You know, Erin,’ said Mum. ‘I have told her, Rhys.’

‘He’s the teacher of that class. The man who started it all.’

‘Yes, right,’ Erin said. ‘Just couldn’t remember the name. That’s great, Rhys.’

Something started beeping in the kitchen. Mum sprang to her feet and went out of the room, muttering something about mini pizzas.

‘Why does everything have to be mini at Christmas?’ asked Rhys, giggling to himself. Then he tipped back his head and yelled: ‘I’m a growing boy!’

‘That’s what I said,’ said Dad. ‘I told her it wouldn’t be enough. Not for a lad like you, so she just bought twice as much.’

‘They’re fun,’ Mum called.

Rhys laughed again and drummed out an energetic beat on his knees. Then he looked at his sister, his eyes twinkling. He held up the tablet. ‘Come and look at these.’

‘Do I have to?’ Erin asked, sitting down next to him.

‘This was just before it all kicked off,’ he said, tilting the screen so she could see. ‘Mum didn’t want to show me in case it made me feel worse.’

Erin looked; Rhys and Dad were standing in front of a large hut. The hut at Bryn Hen. Only now, it was deep brown.

‘Kids these days will never truly experience that special shade of green. Do you remember?’
‘Yeah.’

‘There’s more. Hang on.’ He moved to the next photograph.

It was dark and slightly blurry. It was a bunk bed; Dad was at the top, lying down with his hands clasped behind his head, and Mum was sitting on the edge of the bottom mattress. Rhys laughed.

‘I don’t think Mum liked it,’ he said. ‘But Dad thought it was great.’

‘I had a fantastic time,’ Dad said.

‘It looks the same,’ Erin whispered.

‘What?’

‘It looks the same. Those are the same beds, right?’

‘Nah, they just look it. You can’t expect anything to last the onslaught of hyperactive children for more than a few years.’

She remembered the rough wooden beds, scored deep with messages and drawings. They’ve spelled ‘beware’ wrong. She felt dizzy.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, I’m fine,’ she said. ‘It just…it brings back memories. Stuff I thought I’d forgotten.’

‘You should come and visit when there’s no kids about.’ Then her brother’s eyes grew wide and bright with mischief and he poked her leg. ‘No, wait! You could dress up as the Grey Lady and sneak into the dormitories. Haha!’

Heat rushed to her face. Erin was suddenly bent over, looking down at her feet. There were hands on her back.

‘Bloody hell, are you going to pass out?’ Rhys asked. ‘Was it the car journey, or something?’

‘We’ll open the window,’ said Dad. ‘How’s that?’
‘I’m fine. Really, I’m okay.’ Her voice was trembling, though, and she could feel her hair sticking to the back of her neck.

‘Ten minutes!’ Mum called from the kitchen. ‘Who wants mulled wine? Let’s pour it now, come on.’

Rhys stuck out his tongue in disgust.

‘Tell you what, chaps,’ Dad whispered, tapping his nose, ‘I’ve got some single malt left from my birthday. The really posh stuff. Fancy it, Erin? It’ll do you good.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I don’t really drink.’

‘It’ll perk you up.’

She looked at Rhys, who nodded and said, ‘Mix it with a bit of water and it’ll definitely make you feel better. It’s medicinal.’

‘I’m not ill,’ she said. ‘Honestly.’

‘Mum’s going to make you drink mulled wine, in that case. And I bet it’s horrendous.’

‘I don’t know…I can’t…it’s too hot in here – I can’t think. Fine. Yes, I’ll have one.’

Mum’s voice was coming from the kitchen again, demanding Dad’s help to open something. Rhys was still talking to Erin, but she was not listening. She felt as though her skin, her whole body, was crawling with little legs and all she wanted to do was run outside into the cold air and keep running.

Dad came back with two small, cut-glass tumblers with an inch of diluted whiskey in the bottom of each. He went back into the kitchen again.

‘Does beer and whiskey mix?’ Rhys asked, taking the tumblers and then passing one to Erin. ‘Hold on – you’re actually shaking, Erin. Pass your glass back.’
‘You said it would make me feel better,’ she said, pressing the glass between her knees.

‘Oh, you’re not seriously going to drink that stuff, are you?’ said Mum, coming into the living room. ‘It’s like petrol. Come on, tip it down the sink while your Dad’s faffing with the recycling.’

Rhys clinked his glass against Erin’s, raised it to his mouth and drained it, and was then seized by a fit of coughing. He recovered, and poked his sister in the side.

‘Oh, Erin, no,’ Mum said, walking closer with her hand outstretched. ‘It’s peer pressure, that’s what it is.’

Erin raised the glass and took a sip. The alcohol burned on her tongue, but it was smooth down her throat. She could feel it curled like a warm cat in her stomach and it made her feel instantly better. She was impressed.

‘He put more water in yours,’ Rhys said, wiping his eyes.

‘You know you don’t have to down it one, right?’ Erin asked.

‘I don’t know how you can do it,’ Mum said. ‘Anyway, pizzas are ready. And I’ve poured the mulled wine, now. I don’t want to drink it by myself.’

‘But probably will anyway,’ Rhys muttered.

Dad made another drink after dinner. This one was stronger and as the evening grew late Erin could feel it weighing her down. It numbed her cheeks and made her slow to respond. Rhys, too, looked as though he could not understand what Mum and Dad were saying to him. After a while, he yawned so loudly that it seemed to signal the end of the day with the same resoluteness as a school bell. They started to get ready for bed.
Lying down made her feel worse. Her head was starting to throb and she felt as though she was on a moving train. She sat up and drank the glass of water by her bed. She could still hear the low murmur of her parents’ conversation, so she got up and refilled the glass from the bathroom sink. The water was icy: condensation beaded around her hand. She held the glass to her forehead and pressed it against her cheeks until it made her shiver. Already, she felt better, and she went back to her bedroom.

When the latch of her bedroom door clicked shut, the photograph Dad had sent of her class at the camp appeared in her mind like a camera flash. She shivered once, and then again, and then she started to tremble and she could not stop. At first she thought she was just cold, so she got back under the duvet, but even then she could not stop herself from shaking.

And Erin remembered what Rhys had said. When he joked about the ghost. The Grey Lady.

A new wave of pinpricks rolled over her skin. Her breathing became shallow. She tried to calm down, to ignore the creeping sensation of something in her hair. She felt like she was desperately holding something back; she was facing something big and poisonous that was expanding in her room and would either burst or suffocate her.

There was a moment before it all came back. The sound of Mum’s bedside lamp triggered it like the click of a pocket knife. Erin used to listen out for that sound when she was a child. It was back when she was afraid of the dark; she knew that the moment she heard Mum’s light turn off she was alone. Mum and Dad and Rhys were asleep and Erin was left behind, awake and defenceless in her bed.

Sitting in the dark, in the bedroom she grew up in, Erin remembered what had happened to her.
Chapter 13

She saw the clump of trees they had walked through. She was surrounded by them; the branches were closing in on her. The branches became arms, soft and fleshy and warm. Then she heard giggling.

‘Erin looks like a marshmallow.’

‘Or a big caterpillar.’

Something jabbed in her stomach and she remembered where she was. Bryn Hen. More fingers poked the duvet and she cried out. Heaving the duvet away from herself, she squinted in the daylight at the girls standing around her bed.

‘Calm down,’ said Molly. ‘You’ve still got grass in your hair, by the way.’

Small, bare feet appeared at the top of the ladder and Sarah made her way down. She looked at Erin, and grinned as she hopped back onto the mattress beside her. It made Erin jump and she shuffled away, busying her hands in her bag.

‘I survived,’ Sarah said.

‘No, but –’

‘See, Molly?’ Sarah was not even looking at Erin.

Molly turned on her heel. ‘My cousin isn’t a liar. You obviously got lucky. Maybe it went for one of the boys instead.’

‘I hope it was Dave,’ said one of the others. They laughed.

‘Something was in here last night,’ Erin whispered. ‘On my bed.’

Sarah looked at her with wide eyes and at first Erin thought she was scared. Then Sarah pouted and tilted her head like an adult. Despite telling them all she did
not believe in the Grey Lady, she was obviously proud that she had survived the
night, and now she was not being serious.

‘Were you dreaming?’

‘No. It was on the bed. My bed. And then you said something and it went
away.’

She snapped her fingers. ‘Mum says I talk sometimes. In my sleep. I should
have told you.’

Erin opened her mouth to complain, desperate to get Sarah to understand, but
before she started to speak the dormitory door opened and Miss Baxter walked in. Her
hair was in a messy ponytail and she looked tired. Her eyes scanned the room. She
looked at Erin.

‘You’re not even dressed, yet? You need to hurry up a bit, Erin. But it seems
like you all slept? Did you? Because the boys did not.’

She pressed her hands against her eyes and let out a weak laugh.

‘Was it the ghost, Miss?’ Molly asked.

Miss Baxter’s hands stopped and dropped to her side. Her face was red.

‘What? Don’t be ridiculous. It was sugar and…whatever it is boys talk about. I left
Mr Parker and Mr Davies to it, in the end. But I have to say, you lot were very quiet.
Well done.’

They finished getting dressed and walked to the main building. The air was
cold and light after the rain, and it made the entrance room with the hanging wetsuits
smell even worse. In the canteen, a table had been put against the wall. It was littered
with stacks of bowls, spoons, and plastic containers.

Sarah peered into each of the old ice cream tubs filled with cereal. It was all
dry and uninspiring.
‘Dare you to eat muesli,’ Erin whispered.

Sarah stuck her tongue out in disgust and put a ladleful of cornflakes in a bowl. She topped it with milk from a lidless flask that had clearly been full of tomato soup at some point. Erin copied her, and they went to sit in the corner.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Erin was anxious to try to talk to Sarah about last night again, but she did not know how to start. She did not know how to begin in a way that would not make Sarah think it was a dream.

When she had woken up, the memory and the feeling of the fingers on her head seemed to begin to slip away. It felt like the thunder they heard on the hill; a sound that stirred her – that was scary but exciting at the same time – but as soon as it was over it felt less and less real. It was only because they talked about it afterwards that they could be sure they had heard anything at all. Erin was the only one who experienced the ghost last night. She did not have anyone to understand and help her describe it.

‘Sarah,’ she tested.

Sarah was nudging a blackened cornflake with the back of her spoon. She looked up. ‘Mmm?’

‘Did you…fall asleep right away? Last night?’

Sarah thought for a moment. ‘No, but you did. Why?’

‘And you didn’t hear anything? No one…no one came in?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ Sarah said, nodding with her whole body. ‘They all came in.’

‘The teachers?’

‘Yep. You’d fallen asleep. Miss Baxter turned the light off. Mr Parker came in and told Molly to be quiet which was really funny.’ She listed the events as though she was counting on her fingers. ‘Then Mr Davies came in to check on us, and then
Miss Baxter came in again a few minutes later. And then the others ran out of things
to talk about so we all went to sleep.’

Erin asked if she was sure she had not heard anything else, but then Sarah’s
 eyebrows lifted and Erin saw that she knew what she was really trying to ask.
‘Did you actually see a ghost?’
‘I didn’t see anything,’ Erin said. Then her voice grew louder. ‘I felt it though,
Sarah. It was definitely there. It sat on the bed and it…’

She put her hand on her hair, unable to say it. Sarah’s eyes moved up and over
Erin’s head.
‘Something wrong, girls?’ said Miss Baxter, standing behind them.
‘Erin had a nightmare,’ said Sarah.
‘Probably those awful mattresses,’ said Mr Parker as he walked past. He
jabbed his finger into his chest. ‘We had to sleep on them as well. Not that I did much
sleeping thanks to that bunch over there.’

He pointed to the boys’ table. They were doing exaggerated impressions of
each other and laughing loudly.

After breakfast, the class divided into pairs and each pair was given a map
and a compass. The coloured lines and symbols on the map confused Erin. It was too
grown-up and she did not understand any of it. She was still nervous from the night
before, although each hour that passed seemed to soften the edges of the memory. But
the feeling of fingertips in her hair remained.

She showed the map to Sarah. ‘Can you read this?’

‘Yes.’ Sarah pushed the bridge of her glasses up her nose and held out her
hand for the map. She stared at it for a few moments. ‘I mean…this is a bit different
from the ones I have at home.’
Erin jabbed her finger at a red symbol. ‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a…I think we’re here,’ Sarah said, pointing at something. ‘We’re not going to go that far, are we?’

Mr Davies clapped his hands and the sound of the smack made them fall silent. He started talking, but Erin was not listening. He was rubbing his hands together, the fingers twisting and coiling over each other. His skin was so dry she could hear it rasping beneath his voice.

‘I feel sick,’ she whispered to Sarah.

‘I’m trying to listen.’

Mr Davies suddenly stopped talking and blew a whistle. The noise made Erin jump. Her hands shrank back inside the sleeves of her anorak, and she wanted to make herself as small as possible, to fold in on herself and disappear into the ground like a melting pile of snow. The class and the teachers dispersed until the two of them were left by themselves outside the main hut.

‘What’s up?’ asked Sarah.

‘I feel sick,’ Erin said again.

‘Does that mean…you don’t want to…do the thing? Because I don’t mind, you know, if you don’t feel like…’

‘What are you talking about?’ Erin asked.

She was tugging at the compass on the lanyard around her neck. ‘I’m just saying, if you don’t want to do the orienteering, I don’t mind.’

‘But you were really keen on it yesterday.’

‘I know,’ she said, looking down at her walking boots. ‘But I can’t run quickly and everyone’s already gone and just because we spotted one of the signs yesterday doesn’t mean that we’ll find any more today.’
‘If you can’t read this, then no one else will be able to,’ Erin said, slamming her hand down on the map and making it bend and crease around Sarah’s thumb. ‘You found one yesterday. You wouldn’t shut up about it.’

‘But you said you felt sick.’

‘And you said you didn’t want to be last.’

Sarah started scuffing the toe of her boot into the dirt; her mouth was clenched tight. Erin thought she was about to cry and she felt guilty.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ Sarah mumbled. ‘We’ll do it if you want to.’

‘I don’t. What do you want to do?’

‘Not this.’

‘We can’t stay here, though.’

Sarah nodded. Her glasses were slipping down her nose again; she pushed them up and looked at Erin.

‘Why don’t we go to the one we know?’ she asked, happy again. ‘And then if a teacher sees us then it looks like we’re jotting down the co-ordinates.’

The two of them set off towards the sheds where they had seen the sign the day before. When they got there, they sat down where they could see anyone approaching from the trees. Sarah seemed better now, and Erin did not push her any further.

‘Did you really see a ghost?’ Sarah asked. ‘Last night.’

‘Well, I didn’t see anything.’

‘You felt it?’
Erin brought her hand to her hair and rubbed the top of her head, trying to make the memory from last night more real. It did not help. It only made it more distant, more like a dream. But she said yes, anyway.

Sarah was tying a blade of grass around her ring finger. When she was finished, she showed it to Erin and said she was marrying a man with two garage doors on his house. They laughed, but Erin must not have laughed as much as Sarah wanted. Sarah frowned and pulled away the blade of grass; it was one of those moments where, suddenly, Sarah seemed suddenly desperate to be an adult. Her eyes were flitting back and forth across her legs.

She looked up. ‘Would it help if we swapped?’

‘Swapped what?’

‘Beds. I know mine has that thing written next to it, but I slept all right.’

‘What if it comes for you?’

Sarah was fiddling with the zip of her anorak, avoiding meeting Erin’s eyes. ‘If it…if it happens to me, then it’s happened to the both of us and…then you won’t feel alone…so you should take the top bunk tonight.’

‘Aren’t you scared?’

‘I’ll whack them,’ she said, grinning and jabbing her little fist out. Erin really laughed, then, so Sarah got to her feet and started to kick and punch the air.

She stopped, and stood very straight.

They heard Miss Baxter call out from somewhere out of sight: ‘Is that Sarah?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where’s Erin?’

Erin stood up, and a few seconds later she saw Miss Baxter traipsing towards the two of them from the trees. Her cheeks were red and her hair was sticking to her
forehead. She came up close to them, and then bent double, holding onto her knees and panting for air.

‘Stupid idea,’ she whispered, but her breath was coming so heavily that it was louder than she anticipated. She cleared her throat. ‘How are you getting on?’

‘We got lost,’ Sarah said. ‘And we came here and found this orienteering sign which is somewhere we knew and I said to Erin that we should wait here rather than get lost again. And she agreed.’

‘Yes,’ Erin said.

‘Good girl,’ said Miss Baxter. She stretched out her hand to Erin, and then snapped it back and plunged it into her anorak pocket. She straightened up. ‘God knows where the rest of them are. I found Joe and Tom and told them to head back to the dormitories but whether they’ve actually gone there or not is another matter. Oh, if we have to get a search and rescue team in! The parents will go mad.’

Sarah looked at Erin and shrugged.

‘Are you all right?’ Erin asked their teacher.

‘Thank you, Erin, yes.’ She pushed her hair away from her face. Her mascara had smudged beneath her eyes. She bit her lower lip and watched the two girls for a moment.

‘What should we do?’ Sarah asked.

‘Should we stay with you?’ Erin said.

‘Yes,’ she said, and then she shook her head. ‘No. Can you get back to the camp all right? Just go back. And if you see anyone else, tell them to go back, too.’

The girls nodded. Erin folded up the map to show her they knew what they were doing.

Miss Baxter sighed. ‘Why can’t they all be like you two?’
They set off: Miss Baxter went up the path and the children went towards the trees from which their teacher had appeared.

‘She seemed in a mood,’ Erin said.

‘What if people do go missing?’

‘They’ll come back,’ Erin said. ‘Or the teachers will find them. At least we’re safe.’

Later, at dinner, she tensed up every time someone laughed or a piece of cutlery was banged against the table. Anxiety, like a tightly curled tendril around her heart, started to unfurl and spread outwards.

‘You’re really jumpy,’ Sarah whispered.

‘Sorry,’ Erin said.

Sarah made a noise like a swooping bird and pierced one of Erin’s sad-looking chips with her fork. She rotated it until it was horizontal, drooping slightly at either end under its own weight, and then she folded it into her mouth. ‘Do you think it was a ghost?’

Erin shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you believe in them? Ghosts?’

‘Girls.’ They turned in their seats. Miss Baxter was standing behind them.

‘You’re not still talking about this, are you?’

Sarah looked down, face flushing red.

‘It’s just,’ Erin said, but she could not think of a way to explain herself.

Miss Baxter pulled back the empty chair next to Erin and sat down. Her makeup was neater, now. Her eyes were wide and she was looking at Erin. No, she seemed to be looking at something on Erin; her eyes flitted across Erin’s face as though she was trying to find something.
‘What exactly did you see?’

Erin was silent. Sarah nudged her. ‘It wasn’t so much…I mean, I didn’t –’

‘She felt it,’ said Sarah. She pushed her glasses up her nose.

Miss Baxter frowned and turned to look quickly at the other adults at the teachers’ table. ‘What did you feel?’

Erin looked down at her hands. ‘Like someone was sitting…I don’t remember.’

Erin felt Sarah’s stare like pins in the back of her neck.

‘It sounds like a bad dream,’ said Miss Baxter. ‘I get them sometimes. Really, I do. I feel things that aren’t there. It was just a nightmare.’

She got up and went to where Mr Davies was standing in the corner.

‘Why didn’t you tell her properly?’ Sarah hissed.

‘I did,’ Erin hissed back.

‘You didn’t tell her about the other stuff. Like when it touched you.’

‘She wouldn’t have believed me. You didn’t, this morning.’

Sarah straightened her back. ‘I didn’t. Because ghosts aren’t real. But then I thought that if you said it happened, I would believe you. You don’t lie to me.’

The first time Miss Baxter came to check on the girls, she did not immediately see Erin. The others were still perched on the edge of their mattresses, but Erin was hiding under the duvet and pretending to be asleep so no one could see how scared she was. She heard the door open, and she held her breath.

‘Why are you there, now?’ Miss Baxter asked Sarah. ‘Where’s Erin?’

‘We swapped.’

‘Why?’
'I didn’t…have anywhere to put my glasses. I wanted to put my glasses where I could reach them. In an emergency. And I thought I was going to roll over and break them.’

‘Fine,’ said Miss Baxter. ‘Is she asleep?’

Erin waited for a moment, and then said no.

‘Are you trying to find Narnia?’ Miss Baxter asked.

Erin pulled the duvet away from her face. ‘That was a wardrobe.’

She laughed. ‘Of course it was. Don’t get overheated, doing that.’

The girls on the other side of the room started calling for Miss Baxter, repeating her name in synchronisation over and over again. She rolled her eyes at Erin and Sarah and left them.

The bunk bed rattled, and Sarah’s hands appeared on the wooden railings next to Erin’s face. Then Sarah’s head popped up. She had taken her glasses off now, and her face seemed strange and bare.

‘Are you tired?’ she whispered.

Erin shook her head. She could not imagine shutting her eyes for a moment. Her whole body felt charged, waiting to be plunged into darkness.

‘I’ll try to stay awake, too,’ Sarah said. ‘It’ll be fine. Don’t worry.’

‘Sarah, you’ll fall if you do that.’ Miss Baxter came back to them, and then stood in the doorway. ‘I’m turning the lights off, now. I’ll be back in a bit to check on you.’

The bed shook again as Sarah clambered back down. The rest of the girls in the room got into their beds, and then there was a pause while Miss Baxter took one last look at them all. Erin winced at the sound of the click. Everything was suddenly black; that awful, thick darkness she did not know at home.
‘Goodnight, girls.’

The sickly white glow of the hallway broke the darkness for a brief moment as Miss Baxter opened the door and walked outside.

Erin’s heart moved like wet dough slapped on a countertop. She could feel its pulse in her chest, in her hands, in her ears. The other girls were chatting and their laughter only seemed to make her heart beat faster.

The bed moved.

‘Erin?’ Sarah whispered.

‘I’m fine,’ Erin said, but her voice was quiet and trembling.

‘You’ll shout, won’t you? If it comes again?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because I’ll…I can scream really loud.’

‘Thanks.’

Sarah was quiet. A few minutes later, the other girls ran out of things to talk about and fell quiet, too. The room suddenly became so still and so dark that Erin seemed to shrink inside it. She put her hand in front of her face but she could not see anything.

She needed something she could use to protect herself. She got up and climbed out of bed. At the ladder to her bunk, she paused, and then opened the small cupboard door of the cabinet. She took out her hairbrush, feeling the familiar peaks and lumps of her favourite Disney character stuck to the back of the paddle. The teeth of the brush were mostly missing the little plastic beads on the end, and it was sharp on her scalp. Mum kept trying to make her get a new one, had even bought her a cylindrical one like her hairdresser used, but Erin would not part with this brush. And now she was thankful that she had kept it.
Sarah croaked like a frog next to her. ‘Have you lost something?’

‘No,’ she whispered.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting my hairbrush. Do you think it will come back tonight?’

‘The ghost?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you need your hairbrush for? It’s not morning, is it?’ Already, Erin could hear Sarah’s voice losing its clarity as she drifted back to sleep.

‘No. It’s…it’s for protection.’

Sarah giggled. ‘It’ll pass straight through, silly.’

Erin’s arm dropped to her side, her grasp loosened, but before the brush slid out of her hand she gripped it tightly. ‘Well, it’s better than nothing.’

‘You need a vacuum,’ she said. ‘Trap it in a jam jar.’

‘Good idea – do you have one I can use?’ Erin hissed.

Sarah did not reply. Erin was annoyed at how quickly she had fallen asleep again, and she made sure to rattle the ladder as much as she could on the way back up to her bed.

She burrowed down under the covers, clutching the brush in both hands. It felt good and solid to hold. She tried to ignore what Sarah said about the ghost passing through it. What did Sarah know, anyway? She had not even been awake when the ghost came, not like Erin had. And if it could sit on her bed and tug at the duvet, and pull back the shower curtains, then it must be solid. Enough for her to touch it back. She would hit it as hard as she could, claw at the hands with the sharp plastic teeth, get it right in its eyes. But she could not allow herself to sleep. She had to stay awake.

‘Sarah!’ Erin hissed.
Silence.

‘Sarah!’

‘Go to sleep or I’ll tell,’ someone muttered from the other side of the room.

Erin whispered an apology, but she felt relieved. She could not tell who it was who had spoken to her, but if they were not asleep yet then perhaps they would be awake when the ghost came again. She clung to that thought. She turned it over and over in her mind like a smooth, flat pebble. There was someone else awake with her. There was someone else awake with her.

She heard someone come in. It was Dad, coming to wake her up. Erin nestled further into the bed, but something was wrong. The bed did not feel or smell like hers. She opened her eyes and remembered where she was. Her heart was pounding close to the surface of her chest and she could hear its pulse in her ears. It was loud; she could not hear anything else. Erin pulled the duvet tight around her face as she had done the previous night. She waited.

Nothing happened. Minutes passed and the pounding in her ears eased. As gently as she could, Erin made a gap between the duvet and the mattress so that she could see. It was dark, but now that her eyes had adjusted, she could just make out the shadows of the other bunk beds.

Something snapped in the room. The creak of a wooden bedpost, perhaps, or the cracking of bone. Blood thundered in her ears and her body became rigid.

She buried her face in the duvet, hoping the sound of her rustling would somehow scare the ghost away. The back of her neck was damp and cold. Minutes passed without another sound; Erin calmed down and then began to shiver with the sweat that covered her skin.

‘Sarah,’ she whispered, hopeful, but her friend did not answer.
She pushed back the duvet and felt along the side of the bed until she found the ladder. Carefully, like a cat bringing its paw down on fresh snow, she descended. She paused at Sarah’s bed for a moment, just in case the shudder of the ladder had woken her, but there was no sign of movement. All Erin could hear was the soft hiss of heavy breathing from the others in the room.

Hands outstretched, she walked slowly in the dark, tentatively feeling with her feet for bags and hairbrushes and clothes scattered across the floor. She found the door and pushed. There was a square hallway barely bigger than a closet that led to another dormitory and the shared bathroom between them. Opposite the bathroom was the door to the main corridor of the building. She put her weight against the bathroom door, heaving it open, wincing as her bare feet touched the icy floor. The tiles were rough like sandpaper – they were the same as the ones around the town swimming pool.

She switched on the light. It was a long tube missing its plastic cover like the one in their classroom. It buzzed and glowed at either end, and then it clinked and flashed twice before lighting up the room with a harsh yellow flare.

Being in the bathroom did not make her feel any better. At home, it was like a signal. Her parents would wake up at the sound of the bathroom light switch, wait for her to go back to her room, and if she did not emerge then they would go in and see what was wrong. The bathroom was always a safe place at home. But Erin was not at home, and this bathroom was strange.

Waxy curtains hung at the shower cubicles to the left of her, the bottom of the material turning brown and slimy. It reminded her of the paper Dad used to cover cooling joints of meat. She thought about the way the bones would poke out
underneath. She stood by the sinks, looking at the reflection of showers behind her in the plain, square mirrors bolted to the wall. She avoided looking herself in the eye.

Her imagination suddenly snagged on a monochrome woman screaming, wet hair plastered against her head, the shower water running white and grey around her bare shoulders. Then something else: Dad making a high-pitched squeal like an alarm as he took a knife to a hunk of beef, Rhys laughing and Erin not understanding the joke. She looked up; she thought she saw one of the curtains move. She yelped in fear and turned to face it. The curtain was still. She watched it for a moment, then doubled over to see if she could see a pair of feet under the edge. There was nothing but a cracked bar of greying soap.

Cold crept up her legs. She could feel her feet becoming numb. A few minutes passed in calm silence. Erin started to feel slightly braver. The ghost would have found her by now. She walked out of the bathroom into the dark hallway and pushed open the door to the dormitory.

Something rustled at the far wall. It was a frantic scrabble, like a wild rabbit scrabbling through a hedge. But it was not the sound of one of her friends moving in their sleep; she had disturbed something. She could not see very much in the room, but she could just make out the shape of a figure standing over Sarah’s bed.

Erin ran out and back into the bathroom, letting the door slam heavily behind her. Feet slapping on the tiles, she passed the shower curtains and went around the corner to the toilet cubicles. She breathed with high-pitched gasps that she could not bring under control.

There was a noise at the door; the creak of hinges.

Erin ducked into a toilet cubicle, sliding the bolt as far as it would go. Faintly, she heard the bathroom door open and close.
Her heart and stomach seemed to plunge inside her as she realised she had left the light on. She had advertised herself, made it painfully clear where she was hiding. But maybe, she thought, maybe it would not come into the light. Maybe it was afraid of the light, like when vampires shrink away from the sun. The light would keep her safe, she thought.

She strained to hear footsteps; she could sense something moving, but it was too quiet against her pounding heartbeat. She sat down and tucked her feet up off the floor.

The room went dark. Erin gasped, and clamped her hand over her mouth in horror. She started to shake. Now that the buzzing of the light had stopped, it was eerily silent. She thought she could hear something; it was barely louder than the drumming of her own frantic pulse, but it sounded like a rhythmic hiss. The rustle of fabric as it moved closer. Or breathing.

A clatter of metal; a shower curtain being whipped back. Pause. The sound came again. Erin buried her face in her hands. She could hear the ghost working its way down the shower cubicles. It knew she was there, and it was enjoying the slow, inevitable search for her hiding place. She did not know what to do. She could surprise it, perhaps, by bolting past it and out of the bathroom. That would be unexpected; it might buy her enough time to escape. But it was also a brave thing to do, and Erin did not feel brave. She could only wait in horrified silence until the ghost found her.

The fourth and final shower curtain was pulled back. She heard a soft click like the sound Mum made when she had to change her plans. And then there was a sigh close to the toilet cubicle. Too close. It was outside. All it needed to do was push on the door and it would find Erin, tucked into herself and trembling with terror.
She felt sick. She felt something turn inside her and rush to her throat. She opened her mouth and wailed in a long, low note. There was a sharp intake of breath on the other side of the door, and then a quick succession of soft, padding footsteps.

The air shifted. Erin was alone again.

She stayed still for a few minutes, in case it came back. Then she slowly unravelled, bringing her feet down on the cold tiles again. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but the shadows in the bathroom still made her uneasy. She crept past the showers, now bare and gaping, and went back into the dormitory.

Was there anything left of Sarah? And if there was, would Sarah hate her for running away instead of calling for help?

‘Sarah,’ she hissed.

There was no response. How would she tell Sarah’s parents? How would she explain that she saw the ghost by Sarah’s bed but had been too scared to do anything? She moved closer, trembling hand outstretched as she tried to feel the wooden posts of the bed.

‘Sarah!’

Her hand met a hard plank. She shuffled to the left, and found fabric that crinkled in her hand. Patting upwards, she felt the lumps of Sarah’s feet.

Something hard hit Erin’s shoulder. She staggered back and fell into an open holdall.

‘I told you it’s not funny!’ Sarah yelled.

‘You’re alive,’ Erin said, rubbing her shoulder. ‘I thought…’

‘You thought you could scare me? Because I said I didn’t believe in ghosts?’

‘What?’

‘I know it was you. Grabbing my shoulders and –’
‘No, there was someone else…’

‘Did you plan this? I said I didn’t want to come to Bryn Hen but you made me. You said we’d be partners for everything and I wouldn’t be on my own. You know I don’t like pranks. Why would you do that to me?’

‘I didn’t, Sarah. I was in the bathroom, and when I came back —’

There was movement in one of the other beds, and someone told them to shut up.

‘Sarah,’ Erin whispered.

‘I don’t want to talk to you.’

Dad came by himself to pick Erin up the next morning. Sarah would not speak to her, and left her by herself while the class waited for their parents. She fell asleep in the car and when she woke up, they were rattling over the cattle grid on the road going into their village.

She started to panic when her family were getting ready for bed; she was unusually talkative and kept thinking of things she wanted to tell them, just so that they would stay awake for a few more minutes. Their patience did not last very long, and soon afterwards she was lying in her bed in the dark.

The soft murmuring of her parents’ voices fell quiet. Then Erin heard the click of the lamp at Mum’s bedside. The house began to settle, to snap and rattle. Every sound seemed to have hands behind it – something was here with her making the ceiling creak or shaking the pipes under the floor. The air felt thick with a presence that was watching her.  

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Erin reached out and felt the solid plastic of her lamp. She switched it on. The shadows in her room bulged around the light. Things seemed to move and shift. It was not bright enough to chase out the darkness lingering in the corners.

Erin got out of bed and turned on the main light. Outside her door, the landing creaked and she stood, hand still at the switch, in fear. The door handle moved.

She leapt back. Where her voice had lodged in her chest in the dormitory, now she found she could scream as much as she wanted.

‘Erin?’

Dad burst in through the door, followed a few seconds later by Mum. Erin started to cry. Dad scooped her up and put her back in bed, turning the duvet back so it covered her.

‘What’s the matter?’ Dad asked.

He sat down, and she felt the mattress sink and the duvet tighten across her legs. She yelped and drew her knees up. Dad jerked and stood up again, thinking he had sat on her. Mum stayed at the foot of the bed.

‘Did you have a nightmare?’ she asked.

‘She’s only just gone to bed,’ he said.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Rhys, standing in the doorway.

Dad waved him away. ‘It’s nothing, Rhys. Your sister got a bit scared, that’s all.’

Rhys’s face creased into a wicked grin. ‘Was it the ghost?’

Mum looked at him. She was frowning. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Yes!’ Erin cried, and Mum turned back to her again. ‘It was real. It came and sat on my bed, and tried to pull the duvet away –’

‘Did you see it, then?’ asked Rhys. ‘Maybe you brought it back with you!’
‘Shut up!’

‘Come on, now,’ said Dad. ‘Tell me what scared you.’

But she could not tell him. Not with Rhys there, and not with Mum looking at her as though she was angry. Erin shook her head.

‘You wouldn’t stop talking earlier,’ Mum said. ‘You didn’t mention this ghost then.’

‘Was it too dark in the dormitory?’ Dad said, more to Mum than to Erin.

Mum sighed. ‘No, I heard Rhys trying to scare her before she left. Stop putting horrible things in your sister’s head. I don’t want this to be the start of something that goes on for months.’

Rhys shrugged. ‘Everyone knows ghosts aren’t real. It’s her fault for believing me.’ Then he disappeared back to his room before Mum could shout at him.

‘It…it happened to Sarah, too. It was real.’

‘So you keep saying,’ said Mum. She turned to Dad. ‘Like when you told us you could understand what the lions at the zoo were saying to you. Remember that?’

That was different. She felt a fresh stab in her chest; why would Mum use something like that against her, when it was a completely different situation? But she did not know how to explain herself. She did not know how to describe what had happened in a way that would make Mum understand. She scrunched her duvet in her hands.

‘Don’t crease it. I’m going back to sleep. Leave the light on, if you have to.’

Mum left. Dad bit his lip, looked around Erin’s room, and then reached into the narrow gap between the bed and the wall. He pulled out Erin’s stuffed lion by its tail.
‘Ah - here’s Henry,’ he said, and held it out to her. ‘How’s he going to look after you when he’s squashed down the side of the bed? There you go.’

He watched her squeeze the lion’s paws for a moment, and then slowly retreated out of the door.

Chapter 14

She remembered it all now, like the blinding shock of jumping into cold water. She felt exactly as she had done when she was a child. Her body was rigid; her muscles stung with tension.

Back in her old bedroom, Erin seemed to fall apart. First her limbs relaxed to the point that they were weightless. She started to shiver, in bigger and bigger waves until her shoulders were lifting clear of the mattress.

_Bridget._

_It’s all right, Erin. Go back to sleep._

She let out a sob – a single, feeble croak – and then she covered her mouth with her hand. It would not work, not like this. Bridget’s voice was thin and intangible like smoke; it did not sound the same. Erin tried again, closing her eyes tight, pretending she was still in her own house.

_Bridget, are you awake? Yes, I’m here. But what about Sarah. Bridget._

She could not make it feel real.
The bed was creaking as she shook and strained to stop crying. Any sound she made was so loud and seemed to burst in the quiet of the house.

After a while, she calmed down enough to move her hands away from her face. Her cheeks felt tight and cold. Her breath kept catching as though she was slipping on ice. But as she grew calmer, the stillness settled around her again and made her skin prickle.

She needed to see Bridget’s bedroom light, to catch a glimpse of her walking past the window. She wanted to know that someone was awake with her, could look out for her. She did not feel safe. Not in the dark.

She got out of bed and, as quietly as she could, opened her door and stepped onto the landing. There was no noise or movement from any of the bedrooms. Erin carried on down the stairs. It was better in the kitchen. She went to the sink and picked up a small plate which Dad had left on the counter. Biscuit crumbs dotted the surface. She held the plate in both hands, squeezing it, wondering if she had the strength to snap it. She just wanted to hold something in her hands. Something solid; something that was not fabric, was not her duvet. She put it down again.

The cold of the kitchen floor crept up through the soles of her feet. Her toes were going numb and it felt as though she was slowly vanishing from the bottom upwards. There had been so many nights over the past weeks where it had seemed as though she was the only person awake. She did not think there could be anything worse than that loneliness, but now she felt something else. She felt as though she had been left behind. Her family were asleep because they did not want to know that she was awake. They had never wanted to know why she was awake.

‘Erin?’
She turned, startled, and hit her back against the hard edge of the kitchen counter. Rhys had appeared in the doorway.

He stepped closer. ‘I heard you…before. Are you okay?’

‘Don’t,’ Erin hissed. His hand hovered on the light switch. ‘You know how it buzzes. You’ll wake them up.’

‘Us whispering will wake them up.’

‘Then don’t talk to me!’

He moved closer again. ‘What’s wrong? You’ve been acting weird since we got here.’

‘Nothing. Go back to bed.’

Rhys looked at his bare feet, then back up at his sister. ‘I won’t be able to sleep until you tell me what’s wrong.’

‘Since when were you such a caring brother? It’s your fault –’

‘What’s my fault?’ When she did not answer, he said it louder: ‘Erin? What’s my fault?’

‘It’s your fault no one believed me. You made Mum think I was making it up.’

‘Making what up? Stop being vague.’

‘When I went to Bryn Hen. The ghost. No. No, it wasn’t a ghost, Rhys. It wasn’t a bloody ghost.’

‘Erin, you’re not making any sense. What are you talking about?’

‘You told me about the ghost before I went.’

‘Yeah, and?’

‘And I believed you because something came into the dormitory. I didn’t think…I didn’t think it could be another person so I just assumed it was the ghost, and
that’s how I told you and Mum and Dad about what happened. I didn’t know how else to describe it.’

He understood. Erin saw his eyes open wide; his whole body expanded, and then he seemed to crumple. His shoulders dropped and he bent his head forward. When he looked up at her again his eyes darted; she could see them glinting in the darkness.

‘It was a person? A teacher?’

‘I don’t know, I never saw them. But it could have been.’

‘But you…you said it was a ghost.’ He sat down at the kitchen table. ‘Christ. So what…what happened?’

She sat down with him, in the same places they had taken as children. ‘Someone – I don’t know who – someone came into the room while we were sleeping. Both nights. And they tried to –’

He leaned back suddenly, making the chair squeak on the floor, and then he ran his hands through his hair. ‘And they touched you? Where? What did they do? You said…I remember you saying that it – they – sat on your bed. What did they do?’

‘They put their fingers in my hair. They tried to pull back the duvet.’

Rhys waited for a few seconds, then seemed to relax a little. ‘Is that all they did? They didn’t –’

‘No, no,’ Erin said.

For a moment, his relief made her feel as though she had been overreacting. He seemed concerned, but there was less shock in his face now, less incomprehension and dread. Then she remembered the way he had laughed all those years ago, when she had just come back. What if it had been worse? What if Erin had described it differently? Would people have believed her, then?
‘I think…’

‘What? Was there something else?’

‘The second night, Sarah and I swapped beds. I had been in the bathroom, but when I came back, someone – whoever it was – was standing over her. They mustn’t have realised we’d swapped. Or maybe they had.’

‘Yeah, I remember Sarah.’

She looked down at her feet. ‘I ran away. When I saw the figure standing over her, I ran back into the bathroom. I could’ve screamed for help. I could’ve turned the light on. But I just ran out and left her. And when I came back, she thought it was me on her bed; she never told me what they did apart from grabbing her shoulders. They could’ve done anything, and I was hiding like an idiot in the bathroom.’

He rubbed his face. ‘You can’t blame yourself. You were a kid and –’

There was movement upstairs: footsteps, and the creak of a bedroom door. They stopped talking. Erin looked at Rhys, blaming him for being too loud, for coming downstairs in the first place.

‘What’s all this?’ asked Mum, walking into the kitchen.

‘Do you remember when Erin came back from Bryn Hen?’

‘Rhys, don’t,’ Erin said, her voice hard. ‘It’s fine, Mum. We were just talking. Sorry for waking you.’

Mum wrapped her dressing gown around herself and tied it across her stomach. She came and put a hand on Rhys’s shoulder. ‘When Erin came back from Bryn Hen?’

‘How old were you?’ Rhys asked his sister.

‘It really doesn’t matter, Mum.’
‘She was about seven,’ Rhys said. ‘And she told us she’d seen the ghost. Do you remember?’

Mum looked confused. She started plucking at the end of her sleeve. ‘Ghost? No, I don’t think so. I remember the washing she brought back, though.’

She laughed, and the sound seemed to strike Erin’s head. She had wanted, more than anything, for Mum to leave. She had wanted Mum to go back to bed, and not to hear any of this. But suddenly Erin felt as though her chest was filled with hot ash and now she wanted Mum to stay and see it pour out of her.

‘You don’t remember?’ Erin asked.

‘No…’ Mum said, slowly, in response to Erin’s change in tone. There was a strange atmosphere that Rhys and Erin had created around the table, and she was being careful with what she said.

Rhys seemed to see where this was going, and was suddenly desperate to make her remember. ‘Erin came back and she wouldn’t sleep for weeks. She said the ghost had climbed on her bed.’

‘Wait…yes, the bed. Yes, I do remember. I do, Erin. You said it came and sat on the end of your bed and you felt the mattress sink.’

‘And what did you say?’ Erin asked.

‘What? Oh, I don’t know. It was twenty years ago. Why are you bringing this up now, anyway? It’s nearly two o’clock in the morning.’

‘She’s just told me it wasn’t a ghost,’ said Rhys.

‘No? What was it, then?’ A moment later, Mum said, ‘You don’t mean it was a person?’

‘Didn’t you ever consider that it might have been? That I was telling the truth – at least what I thought was the truth?’
Rhys began to protest, ‘I never thought –’

‘No,’ Mum interrupted. ‘No. It never crossed my mind. I mean, you just said it sat on the end of your bed. And Rhys had been filling your head with all sorts of daft stories. It wasn’t as if it had been…you know…’

‘What?’ Erin said. ‘Sexual?’

They both jumped at the word.

‘But it wasn’t, though, was it?’ Mum asked.

‘Well, yeah,’ said Rhys. ‘He tried to take away her duvet.’

‘He or she,’ Erin said. ‘I don’t know who it was.’

‘It wouldn’t have been a woman though,’ said Mum.

‘Why not?’

‘Because…but you really didn’t see him? Or her. Whoever it was?’ Mum asked.

‘No,’ she said.

Mum moved away from Rhys and came to stand next to Erin. ‘Well, what’s brought it all back?’

‘I haven’t been sleeping,’ she said. ‘For the past few weeks. And now I realise that I’ve been thinking – in the back of my mind – about how vulnerable I was.’

‘Is it because of me?’ Rhys asked. ‘And the stuff at Bryn Hen?’

Mum put her hand to her forehead. ‘Why didn’t you say anything, Erin?’

‘Because I didn’t remember until tonight,’ Erin said. The mood was changing now, the tension crumbling. She was feeling weaker and weaker. The tears were creeping back. ‘And I just thought…if I told you I hadn’t been sleeping…I thought you’d dismiss it.’

‘Dismiss it? Why would I dismiss it?’ Mum asked.
‘Because we dismissed it when Erin started having nightmares,’ Rhys answered, and his voice sounded sad and quiet.

‘Yes,’ she said, and she knew she could not say any more. She got up. Rhys and Mum watched her in silence as she filled a glass with water and left the kitchen. They did not follow her upstairs.

She got back into bed and stared at the ceiling. Her ears were ringing and she was agitated; she could not keep still. She did not even think about sleeping. She knew she would not be able to tonight. There was too much to think about, too much to process with the common sense of an adult rather than the irrational fears of a child.

She rolled onto her side. She had forgotten what had happened to her at Bryn Hen for so many years – what else was she forgetting? There must have been a reason why the person came to their bunkbed both nights. She went through it all again. It must have been one of the teachers, Erin thought, but then she considered the other adults – the leaders, like Rhys. If only she had looked at their face or if she had brought her torch with her. If she had been better prepared. If she had not slept.

Erin heard the buzzing of the kitchen light fall silent. Mum and Rhys came up the stairs. It was quiet again for a few minutes, and then someone tapped softly at her door. It opened.

‘Are you asleep?’ Rhys asked.

‘What do you think?’

Erin sat up and turned on the lamp. Rhys was standing in the doorway, looking upset with himself.

‘Can we talk?’ he said.

‘We’ll keep Mum and Dad up.’
He came in and went to the window. The light from the street made his face pale. Then he turned to his sister and said, ‘I’m sorry. I really want you to talk to me about it. Why don’t we go for a walk?’

‘Now?’

He nodded. ‘Just around the village. It’s well-lit, so we won’t get mugged.’

Erin laughed in spite of herself, and Rhys smiled.

‘You know what old Mrs Peters is like,’ he said. ‘That trowel she always has. Scary stuff.’

‘I’m sure even she’s asleep by now.’

‘Then there’s nothing to worry about. Put some warm clothes on and meet me downstairs in five minutes.’

Rhys was pacing the living room when she came down again. He had Dad’s big torch in his hand and flashed it at the carpet when he saw her. The whole room was drenched in bright light.

‘I feel really important with this,’ he said. ‘I might have to accidentally forget that I put it in my car.’

‘He’ll probably just give it to you if you ask.’ Erin zipped up her coat. She took the set of keys down from the hook by the door.

She felt the cold biting her nose as soon as they stepped out of the door. Fine particles of mist floated lazily around the bulb of the street lamp. She and her brother started to walk, close enough that the fabric of their coats hissed against each other with each step.

‘I wish they’d get a dog,’ he said. ‘We could’ve brought him with us.’

‘I think I’d visit more often if they had a dog – is that a bad thing to say?’
‘Perfectly understandable,’ he said, imitating Dad’s voice. ‘Although it would probably replace us.’

‘I bet it would be a little yapping thing.’

‘And Mum would make it wear pink jumpers.’

‘Her favourite child,’ Erin said.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, going deeper into the village.

‘It would be so dark without these streetlights,’ Erin said, trying to change the subject.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘When you look back towards our house, it’s like you’ve reached the end of the world.’

‘You must be used to it, though, at the camp.’

‘I guess,’ he said. ‘I still get scared, sometimes.’

‘Do you make the kids walk through the woods?’

He shook his head. ‘We don’t do that any more. Even I don’t like the woods when it’s dark.’

The village was still and the air that night was calm; it felt like walking through a gallery. Alone, it might have been unsettling, but with Rhys walking by her side, Erin relaxed. They might have been the only people awake for miles, but was that such a bad thing, if Rhys was next to her?

A cat padded across the road in front of them. It hopped over a puddle and onto the pavement and then stopped, one paw hovering, to stare at Erin and her brother.

Rhys crouched and held out his hand. The cat took a few tentative steps forward, paused, and then ran to him. It rubbed its face against his knee, and then did the same to Erin.
‘Maybe you should get a cat,’ Rhys said. ‘They keep odd hours.’

She laughed. The cat grew bored of the attention and trotted away from them. They followed it.

‘Do you ever do this at home?’ he asked. ‘Go for a walk like this?’

‘No. I never considered it, actually. But there was…’

‘What? Tell me. Please?’

She could feel herself growing nervous. ‘You’ll think…you’ll think it’s weird.’

‘I always think you’re weird,’ he said. Then he became serious. They stopped walking so he could look at her. ‘But if it helped you, then that’s what matters.’

Slowly, Erin carried on, and Rhys kept pace with her.

‘The house opposite mine,’ she said, ‘often had a light on in the middle of the night. A couple live there – maybe in their mid-fifties? And I think the woman…I think she couldn’t sleep, either. I was really relieved, the first time I saw that her lamp was on. I didn’t feel so alone.’

Rhys nodded. ‘You felt safer?’

‘Exactly,’ Erin said. ‘But then I think I got too attached. I gave it too much meaning. I relied on her lamp being on – it was the only thing that made me feel better for being awake. And I knew something was stopping me from sleeping. There was something I couldn’t remember, I could feel it. And I…just needed to talk to someone.’

‘So you reached out to her?’

‘Not exactly,’ Erin muttered, losing confidence again. She did not know how to tell him. ‘She…spoke to me first.’
They had reached the patchy playing field at the bottom of the village. An animal – perhaps a fox or another cat – had its nose to the ground by the rugby post at the far end. Erin and Rhys sat on the low wall that surrounded the field. They did not say anything for a few minutes; Rhys was waiting while she tried to find a way to explain Bridget to him.

‘What’s her name?’ Rhys asked.

She bit her lip. ‘Bridget.’

He smiled. ‘But did you actually tell anyone – your friends and family, I mean – that you weren’t sleeping? Mum didn’t seem to know. Did you see a doctor?’

‘I mentioned it to the people at work – I had to, I could barely function sometimes. But I didn’t talk about it, you know?’

‘Why not?’

She thought. ‘I was afraid, I guess.’

‘That people wouldn’t take you seriously?’ he asked. He was looking down at his shoes and Erin could not see his face.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry I said it was your fault.’

‘It is, though,’ he said.

She gripped his arm. ‘It’s not. Rhys, it’s not. I didn’t know how to explain myself properly.’ She looked up at the sky. ‘It sounds awful, but I wonder if people would have believed me if…if what had happened to me – and to Sarah – had been more serious.’

‘But it’s better that it wasn’t. You shouldn’t think about it like that.’

‘If I hadn’t been so scared, Rhys, I could have seen who it was. I ran away.’

‘You were only a kid; no one could ever blame you for running away.’

‘You’re probably right.’
He sighed and took hold of his sister’s hand. ‘You’re freezing. Let’s head back.’

When they got back to the house, they lingered by the front door for a moment.

‘Are you going to go to bed?’ Rhys asked, gently tossing the house keys in his hand.

‘I don’t know. I’ll try. I always try.’

He ran his thumb over the ridges of the key, thinking hard about something.

‘When you go back – to your house, I mean – are you going to get help? See a doctor, or something?’

Erin fiercely shook her head. ‘I don’t want that. Not yet, anyway.’

‘You can talk to me about it, you know. I think we should talk more.’

‘I think so, too.’

‘And the woman over the road. Bridget.’

‘What about her?’

Rhys looked at his sister. ‘I think you should keep talking to her. Tell her about it, about what happened.’

He unlocked the door and they went back into the dark house.

In the morning, when Erin came downstairs, Mum would not look at her directly. It annoyed her. She wanted Mum to be the first to say something about last night, but the only conversation they had was small-talk about the Christmas dinner.

Dad must have noticed that something was wrong, or perhaps Rhys had told him, because he was suddenly fetching his car keys with an excuse that he had
forgotten to buy something. Rhys caught him before he left, and they went out together.

Erin looked at Mum, who started to rummage in the cupboard.

‘It happened to Sarah, too,’ Erin said. She winced; it was the wrong way to start after so much silence.

‘At Bryn Hen?’

‘Yes. We’d swapped beds. You know she moved schools afterwards, don’t you? Do you remember?’

Mum paused for a moment. ‘Yes.’

‘Her mother must have come to you about it.’

‘She did.’

‘Did she give a reason for the move?’

‘Erin, it wasn’t to do with you. Or whatever it was that happened at the camp.’

‘What was the reason?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mum snapped. Her shoulders slumped. ‘Look, it was such a long time ago, and –’

‘And? Why can’t we talk about it now?’

‘Fine! Fine, let’s talk about it. Go on – talk.’

Erin could feel herself losing her nerve to stand up to Mum. She closed her eyes for a moment and calmed her racing thoughts. When she spoke again, her voice was calm and quiet. ‘I don’t suppose you know who it could’ve been.’

Mum kept looking into the cupboard. ‘I’m not going to start speculating, Erin. You shouldn’t, either.’

‘What am I supposed to do, then?’
Mum suddenly turned around, clutching a jar of gravy granules to her chest. ‘All right, say you knew who it was – what would you do? They’ve probably retired by now. Would you confront them? Get the police involved?’

‘I don’t –’

‘Start spreading rumours on the internet?’

‘I don’t know!’ Erin shouted.

Mum put the jar on the counter. Her hands were shaking.

‘I don’t remember enough,’ Erin went on more quietly. ‘Maybe if I did, I could do something. At the time, Sarah thought it was me who grabbed her, so she wouldn’t know who it was, either. But it could have been anyone and…for God’s sake, why didn’t you listen to me when I told you? You never…’

‘Never what?’

‘Never helped me when I needed you.’ Her voice was beginning to break. She swallowed. ‘You were too busy with work and I just felt like I was in the way. Like you were always angry because of me.’

‘Don’t say that, Erin. That wasn’t how it was.’

Erin laughed. ‘There – you’re doing it again. Making me doubt myself, like I’m making things up. This is why we don’t talk properly any more.’

‘Because of me? You’re not to blame at all?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You were always living in your own head when you were little, but you’re even worse now. You’re impossible to talk to; I feel like I’m phoning a sleepwalker most weeks, instead of my daughter.’
Erin gestured to the three bottles of red wine on the kitchen counter. ‘Maybe I’d have better communication skills if I’d grown up with a Mum who wasn’t drunk all the time.’

‘How dare you,’ Mum hissed. Her face was flushed.

‘You know it’s a problem. You just don’t do anything about it.’

‘I can’t help it. I get overwhelmed.’

‘With what?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know, Erin. When I worry about things, I get overwhelmed and I…drink. It was worse when I was working. And you two were always trying to make me worry.’

‘Then it’s better to be in denial when things go wrong?’

‘Yes. No, not like that.’

Erin shook her head and pushed her chair back from the table.

‘What do you want me to do, then?’ Mum asked. ‘Tell me what to do to help.’

‘You need me to tell you? I’ll sort it myself; you’ll only make it worse. I’ll get counselling, or something.’ She started to walk out of the kitchen, but turned back when she began to feel a cold weight on her shoulders. ‘You know, talk to someone.’

Mum nodded, but did not reply.

Erin began to sleep better than she had done for weeks, but it still was not right. It took her a long time to fall asleep; the slightest noise in the house would sound like danger when she was on the edge of sleep, and her eyes would open again. And she was dreaming vividly, now, of trees and anoraks and things shifting around her in the room.
The night before she and her brother were due to leave their parents’ house, she had a nightmare that dragged her out of sleep. Breathing heavily in the dark, her impulse was to look out for Bridget’s light. But Bridget was not there.

She got up and crept to the bathroom. As quietly as she could, she wiped her face and neck with a cold washcloth. She could not talk to Bridget here. It did not feel right; she could not focus enough to make it real.

Someone tapped gently on the bathroom door. She thought she had imagined it at first, but it came again a moment later.

‘Are you all right?’ Rhys whispered. He slowly opened the door and peeked his head through the gap. His hair was messy around his left ear.

‘Yeah, yeah. Just had a weird dream, but it’s okay. Did I wake you up?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Come and talk to me.’

She followed him into his room.

‘How have you made it so messy in here?’ she asked, closing the door behind her.

‘I know exactly where everything is, so it’s not a mess to me.’

He gestured to the wooden chair tucked into his desk. It still had stickers of cartoon characters on the back, half-torn away in white, papery trails. Erin pulled it out and sat down. Rhys sat on his bed. She could smell the warm scent of him from the sheets.

She reached over and switched on the lamp that hunched over the desk. ‘I need to tell you something.’

Rhys gripped the edge of the mattress. ‘Did you remember something else?’

‘No,’ Erin said. ‘No, it’s not about Bryn Hen.’
She hesitated, and stared down at the surface of the desk. She could see faint grooves in the wood from his handwriting; large and jagged letters that were all tangled up.

‘What is it?’ Rhys asked.

‘I don’t know how to phrase it. It isn’t really something I’ve admitted to myself, and I’m finding it difficult to think about.’

‘You don’t have to tell me if you really don’t want to.’

‘I do. I do, because I’ve already told you about it, but not what it’s really like.’ Heat rose to her face; she knew she was not making sense.

Rhys looked up at the ceiling. ‘Is it about Bridget?’

She stared at him, and nodded. ‘When you were little,’ she said, ‘did you ever talk to things…in your head, I mean?’

Rhys frowned, and then grinned. ‘I was best mates with my Spider-Man figure, if that’s what you’re getting at.’

‘Yes, like that.’

‘And you had that lion, didn’t you? He was always with you after you came back from Bryn Hen.’

Erin nodded. ‘I used to pretend that he was watching out for danger.’

‘Why do you ask? Are you…are you saying you did the same thing with this woman?’

She gritted her teeth. She could not look at him. Tears were burning her eyes and she blinked hard.

‘Erin?’

‘It sounds ridiculous,’ she said, shaking her head.

Rhys said quietly, ‘I don’t think it does.’
‘It made me feel better to see that someone else was awake,’ said Erin. ‘After a while – when you can’t sleep – you start going over the same thoughts. Your head just goes in circles. I’d think about what sort of person she was, and what was keeping her awake. And then I just started having conversations with her in my head. I’d lie in bed and close my eyes and I’d picture talking to her on the phone. It would help me sleep. I’d relax, and I’d be thinking about something different, and I’d drift off. For a while it seemed real. It did, Rhys. It felt real.’

Rhys listened, and then asked, ‘How do you know she’s called Bridget?’

‘I don’t,’ Erin said. She looked down at her knees. ‘I made that up. I don’t know what her name is. It sounds mad, doesn’t it? It’s creepy and awful.’

He reached over and squeezed her arm. ‘Don’t think about it like that. You had no one to talk to, so you used your imagination. You were scared, and she made you feel better, even if she didn’t know it herself. I don’t think she would mind.’

‘You’re just saying that.’

‘I mean it. Sometimes I get phone calls from parents to say I helped their child with something, even though I didn’t think I had.’ He shook his head. ‘I didn’t mean to bring up the camp.’

‘It’s okay,’ Erin said. ‘That sounds nice, though.’

He smiled. ‘Yeah.’

They were silent for a few minutes. Then Rhys asked, ‘Hey, why don’t you try talking to her? Properly, I mean. Do it for real.’

She frowned. ‘Properly? Rhys, I’ve been talking to her in my head for the last few months. I gave her a made-up name.’
‘You can leave that bit out,’ he said, laughing. ‘She might be really lonely at night. She might need your help, too. I don’t know – it was just a thought. Might be a nice thing to do.’

During the rest of her time at her parents’ house, Erin wondered what to do about Bridget. On the drive back, Rhys brought up his idea again.

‘I think you should do it,’ he said. ‘You’ve lived there – what is it now?’

‘About five years,’ Erin said.

‘I’m sure she’s seen you about. She’s probably even noticed that you’re awake at night, too.’

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘I’ve never spoken to her, though. I wouldn’t know how to start it.’

Rhys drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. ‘You could always wait until it snows and then offer to dig out their car. Keep a spade ready by the front door.’

She laughed. ‘That is a terrible suggestion.’

‘Why don’t you put a sign in the window?’

‘But what if some other person walks past and sees it?’

‘They can join in, too. Seriously, though, I think it would help if you had someone to chat to at night. Do you think so?’

‘Yeah, I do,’ she said. ‘Even though they weren’t real, those conversations did make me feel better.’

He nodded. ‘Or if not her, then someone else. I’m sure there are forums and stuff.’

‘There’s loads,’ Erin said. ‘I had a look – that’s why I bought the camomile tea. People said it was supposed to be good.’
‘Was it?’

‘Not really.’

He laughed. ‘Will you keep me updated? Not just about your sleep. Other stuff, too. I know the phone signal’s rubbish where I am, but you could e-mail? You could write it at night, then. When you can’t sleep.’

‘Thanks. I might do that.’

As they had set off in the morning, Rhys carried on back to Bryn Hen after he had taken Erin back to her house. He said he thought she deserved some peace and quiet, and as much as that was true, Erin felt abandoned when she saw his car drive away again.

The silence of her house pressed on her like a heavy net. It seemed to get worse as the afternoon darkened.

She kept looking out across the road. Bridget’s car was there and flashing Christmas lights were on in the living room window. Erin was restless, waiting. She drafted and re-drafted notes – some with a message, and some with just her mobile phone number. She scrunched them all into tight balls, throwing them towards the bin in the corner and frequently missing.

As the scraps of paper built up on her living room floor, she started to grow nervous of the idea of reaching out at all. Rhys had meant well by suggesting it, but it just did not seem possible. Even if she did make contact with the woman – whatever her name was – the child-like embarrassment of all the made-up conversations would still weigh down her. She would never be able to put aside fully the idea of Bridget.

She went to bed at ten o’clock. She lay on her back in the darkness, looking at a gathering of shadow around her ceiling light. After a while, she closed her eyes. Now that she was back, the house was growing warm again, and it creaked and
groaned around her. A particularly loud thud from above sent a jolt through her heart, and she was staring at the ceiling again. She reached across and turned on the bedside lamp. It was just after midnight. She exhaled deeply to calm herself. Her limbs still felt agitated with the need to run, so she got out of bed to stretch.

She walked over to the window. Ashamed of her evening spent writing notes, she had closed her curtains before she went to bed. Now, she drew them back. Bridget’s – the woman’s – light was on. The rest of the house was dark. She felt the familiar sense of safety wrapping around her. She stood there and waited for her body to relax again.

The woman walked past the window. She stopped, turning her head quickly to look across the street. She was looking at Erin. It was real.

Everything Rhys had said to her on their walk that night rushed through her. She wanted it – she wanted to talk to the woman. She felt incredibly young, suddenly; she needed something to hold onto, like the edge of Dad’s coat.

Erin reached up and waved.

The woman’s eyes were wide for a moment, but then she smiled. She raised her hand and waved back.

Commentary: Representations of Insomnia as a Modern Romanticised Illness

Contents
Chapter 1

Introduction
Someone Else Awake explores the ways in which sleep can be disturbed by the re-emergence of unprocessed trauma. The novel focuses mainly on Erin’s struggle with sleeplessness, but also includes experiences of parasomnias – hallucinatory states of half-sleep such as sleep paralysis – that exacerbate her distress. It is informed by a variety of sleep research, both scientific and cultural, that identifies the key symptoms, causes and treatments of sleep disorders. The following discussion will draw together the research framework and writing process underpinning Someone Else Awake. Erin’s insomnia is a delayed reaction to a traumatic childhood experience, but sleep disorders can also be a result of physical illness or environmental factors. This commentary will discuss our relationship with sleep, beginning with the sense of vulnerability expressed by writers and commentators exploring sleeplessness in early modern England, and brought up to date with the twenty-first-century obsession with ‘perfect’ sleep.

My research examines insomnia as an illness. The first section of this analysis will attempt to establish a timeline of sleeplessness as illness in the public imagination. I will outline the canon of literature attesting to Susan Sontag’s theory of romanticised illness by examining the presentation of tuberculosis and the preoccupation with deathbed rituals and memoirs in the nineteenth to early twentieth century. Subsequently, I will observe the ways in which Sontag’s paradigm can be transferred to fictional accounts of insanity before arguing that insomnia is a twenty-first century romanticised illness.

The next part of my commentary will focus on presentations of sleep disorders in literature. I will begin with a brief discussion of historical texts prior to the nineteenth century, and will then explore Gothic depictions of insomnia and somnambulism in context with medical reports and documents examining the
phenomenon of mesmerism. Identifying a twentieth-century shift from popular to scientific interest in sleep disorders, I will argue that between the 1920s and 1980s, there was a development of sleep centres and investment in sleep research, and I will compare this scientific fascination with insomnia to the literature of the period. I will then discuss the prevalence of sleep disorders in the fiction of the last twenty years, and I will argue that it is insomnia rather than parasomnia – sleep disorders affecting the nervous system, such as sleep paralysis and night terrors – that captivates the modern imagination.

My thesis will identify insomnia as a modern pathological preoccupation. Through analysing fiction and creative non-fiction such as contemporary memoirs of insomnia and a selection of popular scientific journalism, I will outline the intense contemporary focus on the idea of ‘perfect’ sleep. As I will show, Erin initially demonstrates an acute anxiety regarding her sudden inability to sleep; she has been subconsciously influenced by texts and television programmes seeking to micro-manage sleeping habits. Throughout this discussion, I will demonstrate how Someone Else Awake encompasses the discussed themes by drawing on the enduring prevalence of sleep in literature as well as showing insomnia as the new preoccupation.

The final section of the commentary will pay particular attention to the themes of loneliness and communication that are present throughout Someone Else Awake. I will discuss the creation and role of Bridget, as well as the way in which her character evolves through conversations with Erin. Erin’s inability to communicate, as I will demonstrate, becomes a focal point of the novel.

An article published in The Guardian in September 2017 described a dramatic increase in sleep deprivation: ‘In 1942, less than 8% of the population was trying to
survive on six hours or less sleep a night; in 2017, almost one in two people is.¹ In parallel to the apparent ubiquity of insomnia, my novel seeks to demonstrate the confusion, distress and isolation that chronic sleeplessness causes. Erin may gain a sense of comfort from the sight of Bridget’s light across the street, but, as the following commentary will explore, being awake at night is an intensely lonely experience.

On Romanticised Illness

From childhood diseases, to lifelong skin or respiratory sensitivity, to more serious conditions, each of us experiences afflictions that separate us from ideals of health. In her influential essay, ‘Illness as Metaphor’ (1978), Susan Sontag seeks to explore the relationship between illness and the construction and perception of the self. In particular, Sontag argues that illness has often been romanticised in cultural history. It is important to note here that Sontag’s use of ‘romanticised’ is synonymous with the act of glamorisation. For Sontag, disease is romanticised when a sufferer is made to seem enviable and part of some aesthetically or creatively exclusive realm. While the term bears similarity to the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century – and, particularly in the case of tuberculosis, its appreciation for heightened passion and emotion – Sontag applies the word in a modern context to mean the (often unrealistically) attractive presentation of diseases. Throughout this commentary, I will use the term as Sontag uses it: to describe an illness that has attracted an image of privilege.

Regarding nineteenth-century depictions of tuberculosis, she argues that the disease was presented to make its sufferers seem ‘singular’ and ‘more interesting’.

Furthermore, as Sontag points out, creative representations of illness have frequently associated wisdom with pathological conditions, suggesting that disease ‘exacerbates consciousness’ (Sontag, p. 37).

The Industrial Revolution precipitated the rapid expansion of manufactured goods, but this dramatic change came at the cost of the health of those who made them: the working class. Long hours in poor conditions, exposure to dangerous

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Alice Vernon
machinery and substances, and the uncontrollable spread of disease among the workforce led to a life expectancy of between seventeen and thirty years.³ As such, death was all too common an occurrence in mid-Victorian households. Condition-of-England interim texts, both fictional and non-fiction reports, recorded the state of the country and its ailing workforce, frequently portraying the death of characters – either through a sudden mechanical accident or as a slow, degrading illness that gave opportunity for the reader to reflect on the cruelty of working-class exploitation.

The literary promotion of a code of acceptable behaviour for the morbidly sick led to the emergence of a cultural notion of the ‘good’ death. As part of this, there was a need for death to be memorialised, and for the dying to be remembered in an idealised fashion. New developments in photography enabled families to preserve an image of the dead, but post-mortem photography was a grim and rarely encouraged practice. It was most often performed in cases of stillbirth or infant death, as proof of the child’s existence.⁴ It was more common and morally acceptable to be immortalised through the writing of deathbed memoirs. According to Pat Jalland, these diaries served as ‘personal therapy for the writer.’⁵ In addition, Diana Fuss points out that these memoirs were often written early in the process of dying, before suffering became too great and narcotics were administered.⁶ Fuss demonstrates that a person’s last words ‘rarely match up with those recorded in biographies’ – suggesting that those who observe death preserve an idealised memory of a poetic final statement (Fuss, p. 900).

An excellent example of such a text is *The Penitence and Death of the Notorious Mrs. D****, written by Reverend Henry Revell in 1832. Whilst the text is interspersed with Mrs. D’s correspondence and reported speech, it is equally Revell’s memoir of attending to the dying woman. Having attempted suicide several months prior to her final illness, Mrs. D calls on the Reverend to help her gain redemption before her death. It is her acceptance of her guilt, and her renewed faith, that Revell emphasises to his reader. In his conclusion he writes: ‘She was as depraved as she well could be – but she repented. In her we behold a stupendous display of mercy, watchful Providence, and a choice specimen of God’s power to save, renew and sanctify the soul.’7 We do not witness Mrs. D’s own reflections on her illness and death at first hand; her state is presented by the observer, as the model of an ideal Christian death for readers to follow.

Beneath the narrative of deathbed redemption in Revell’s text, there is a sense of concealed sexuality to his relationship with Mrs. D. She calls for the Reverend, and he soon discovers her very limited knowledge of scripture (Revell, p. 2). Over the course of the narrative, she learns about the Bible from Revell until ultimately she converses purely through a religious rhetoric. After her death, Revell communicates his attraction to her: ‘As my prayers have gone before, so shall my soul follow her, to heaven. My affection for her is too strong to be weakened by time, and too holy to be destroyed by death’ (Revell, pp. 295-296). Revell emphasises the piety of their relationship, but there is something undeniably sexual in the cumulative effect of Mrs. D’s religious exclamations and eventual death. It is a striking example of what critic Regina Barreca describes as the ‘satisfaction’ – both religious and sexual – of the

Victorian death-bed scene.\(^8\) Even in seemingly the most pious, ideal narratives of death, then, the presence of the bed as the focus of emotion and attention inevitably created parallels between sexuality and illness.

In response to overwhelming mortality rates during the mid-nineteenth century, the physical construction of the bedroom underwent rigorous change. From barracks to lodging houses, sleeping space was the subject of new hygiene standards. As Tom Crook explains: ‘The provision of individual sleeping arrangements and a specified volume of air went hand in hand with other sanitary technologies and tactics’ and ‘the sleeping body was thus subject to a meticulous hygienic management: it was spatialized, aerated and cleansed.’\(^9\) In such an environment, it is no surprise that a preoccupation with the bed emerged more strongly than ever in mid-Victorian fiction, becoming recognisable as a unique space in which states of existence – life and death – could merge.

In *North and South* (1855), for example, Gaskell emphasises the duality of the deathbed as a place for temporary and permanent rest. As Curl notes, the Industrial Revolution ‘brought wealth and death,’ and Gaskell also strives to present the discordance between the environments of the working- and upper-class diseased (Curl, p. 20). By creating a parallel between the fatal illnesses of Bessy and Margaret Hale’s mother, Gaskell uses the bed as a symbol of such class differences. As a working class girl, Bessy Higgins spends many of her final hours on a settle, rather than a bed. Gaskell emphasises Bessy’s discomfort: she is ‘convulsed into double restlessness’ despite Margaret’s best attempts to rearrange her pillows and get Bessy

into a better position.\textsuperscript{10} When, at last, Bessy falls asleep, it is with ‘many starts, and muttered pleadings’ (Gaskell, p. 201). It is with deliberate contrast that Gaskell transfers the reader from the makeshift sickbed of the working class to the luxurious environment of the privileged. Margaret Hale’s mother is ‘full of praises of the waterbed’ given to her by Mrs. Thornton for the sole purpose of providing comfort during her illness, and it is on this bed that Mrs. Hale has ‘a good sound resting sleep’ (Gaskell, p. 201). For Gaskell, sleep is dependent on wealth. It becomes something of a luxury; only those able to afford to live in comfort achieve sleep of quality beneficial to their condition.

But even those with an above-average quality of life were not exempt from disturbed sleep. For example, in his 1861 essay, ‘Night Walks’, Charles Dickens effectively describes the experience of loneliness brought about by sleeplessness: ‘Methought I felt much as a diver might at the bottom of the sea.’\textsuperscript{11} It is this sense of solitude, of not having a protective figure to watch over her, which partly brings Erin to imagine the conversations with Bridget. In Chapter 3, for instance, Erin’s distress at not sleeping becomes worsened by her feeling of isolation: ‘Being by herself had never bothered her. But usually she chose to be alone, and chose when to see other people. Now she felt like an outcast – that everyone had rejected her the moment sleep did’ (p. 46). For Erin, insomnia is a kind of personal attack: it both represents and exacerbates her isolation from others. Her control over her social and family life – particularly in regards to her mother and brother – is shown to be disintegrating, and her sleeplessness forces her to confront the idea that she does not properly communicate with anyone.

In a further parallel to Dickens’ experience of sleeplessness, the novel draws on images relating to water to describe how Erin feels. For example, in Chapter 3, when her lack of sleep begins to affect her physically: ‘It felt as though she was inside an aquarium tank. Their voices reached her but they were muffled and odd’ (p. 53). By using this image, I show that Erin’s sense of increasing distance from other people is also acutely physical. At night, she is separated from a human community by her inability to sleep, but her inability to sleep also makes it difficult to process information during the day. Thus, the idea of being underwater is intended to evoke Erin’s growing feelings of slowness and distortion.

Thomas Mann’s 1924 epic, The Magic Mountain, is a key example of illness presented in literature. While visiting his sick cousin, Joachim, in a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Alps, Hans Castorp soon discovers he is also suffering from the disease. The Berghof sanatorium becomes a threshold between health and death, but as a community for the wealthy sick it occupies a space away from social obligations and responsibilities. The patients, treating their illness as a retreat, partake in what Claudine Herzlich calls a ‘form of deviance’ – illness is an external force that allows the sufferer to resist the normal social routines of the healthy. Sontag uses The Magic Mountain as evidence for her case of romanticised tuberculosis: for Hans Castorp, she writes, illness is a ‘promotion’ – it is a condition synonymous with ‘freedom’. Hans becomes rather attached to the slow pace of life in the Berghof, and upon his diagnosis, he is overwhelmed by a sense of exultation. Mann writes that he would be ‘shaken from deep within him by a frantic burst of triumphant laughter’ (Mann, p. 184). This moment of joy in the presence of disease contrasts with the morbid

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curiosity with which Hans first regards his bed. An American woman, he is informed, died in his room two days before his arrival, and on his first night Hans exclaims: “It is a regular death-bed, a common death-bed” (Mann, p. 17). Hans wants to be ill, but not to think about death. He wants medical treatment, and to be affiliated with the patient community, but only in an everlasting state of health-in-illness.

Sontag presents the idea of a social parallel: the ‘kingdom of the well’ and ‘the kingdom of the sick’ (Sontag, p. 3). The Berghof in The Magic Mountain certainly is a ‘kingdom’ – it is a rather exclusive retreat for the wealthy, and Mann frequently writes scenes of feasting and revelry. As with Gaskell’s presentation of the dichotomy between the illness experience of the upper and lower classes, Mann demonstrates that illness can be a respite within an environment of wealth. Tuberculosis is Hans Castorp’s key to the ‘kingdom of the sick’, and once inside he can partake of all the routines and rituals of this liminal community. For example, Settembrini enquires about Hans’ X-ray diapositive, and upon being shown it, says: “Ah, you carry it in a case. Like a certificate, as it were – a sort of membership card” (Mann, p. 241). Medical ephemera become tokens of identity, like a passport into the community of illness.

At the beginning of Someone Else Awake, Erin gathers items she believes will improve her sleep. In Chapter 2, for instance, I include a scene in which she searches the internet for advice on how to sleep better. She is almost overwhelmed by the volume of information, and it immediately changes the way she sees herself and her sleeping habits: ‘Those articles made Erin feel as though she had not been doing enough’ (p. 36). Prompted by what she reads online, she ‘invests’ in her sleep, focusing her self-care on resolving her insomnia through buying pyjamas, bedding, and changing her diet and nighttime routine. Erin’s increasing preoccupation with
objects promoted as sleep aids forms her external identity in the ‘kingdom of the sick’. Through this idea, I suggest that what forms a large part of her physical existence as a sufferer of illness does not in any way affect her condition. As with Hans and his diapositive, however, for Erin there is something attractive in having tangible evidence of an internal disorder.

By the mid-twentieth century, the delicate yet passionate tuberculosis patient had been replaced in literature by portraits of mental illness. As with tuberculosis, insanity became recognised as providing an ‘exile’ (Sontag, p. 36), a membership to medical discourse. Both were frequently presented as lingering conditions that allow permanent participation in an exclusive community. Furthermore, they were perceived as similar in the sense that they could promote the sufferer to new ways of thinking – a new ‘wisdom’ that could only be achieved through disease. The insanity narratives of the mid- to late-twentieth century, then, were romanticised for their glimpses into unique and interesting interpretations of the world. Whilst life in The Magic Mountain is idealised for its slowness, literary presentations of mental illness create a more dramatic image of a medical community. For example, in Ken Kesey’s 1962 novel, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, the daily experience in the institution is one of violence, rebellion, passion, and intense human relationships. A good example of this sense of excitement in illness occurs towards the end of the novel, where McMurphy leads a group of patients on a fishing trip. The novel’s narrator, Chief Bromden, describes the experience as follows:

[McMurphy had] shown us what a little bravado and courage could accomplish, and we thought he’d taught us how to use it. All the way to the coast we had fun pretending to be brave. When people at a stop light would stare at us and our
green uniforms we’d do just like he did, sit up straight and strong and tough-looking and put a big grin on our face and stare straight back at them till their motors died and their windows sunstreaked and they were left sitting when the light changed, upset bad by what a tough bunch of monkeys was just now not three feet from them, and help nowhere in sight.¹⁴

This particular passage emphasises the separation between the sick and the well. The sick are united both by a physical identity – their green uniforms – and by a sense of community. Perhaps more significantly, they are also shown as experiencing more exciting and memorable situations than those in the ‘kingdom of the well’. The patient group is romanticised for its lack of social conduct – the patients gain great amusement, even a kind of spiritual lift, through scaring normal people. This is what Herzlich calls a ‘more intense life, freedom, power over others and privileges [that are] concomitants of the abolition of the social world in favour of the exceptional and superior world of illness’ (Herzlich, p. 116). The group’s startling effect on the people they encounter on their trip attests to this idea of illness as a form of power; they relish the way in which they intimidate other people.

The relationship between mental illness narratives and themes of childhood is further explored in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (1963). An intriguing aspect of protagonist Esther Greenwood’s condition is her emotional connection to Doctor Nolan. Surrounded by medical personnel she does not trust, Esther finds a safe space with this other female presence. Plath writes: ‘I thought if Doctor Nolan smoked, she might stay longer. This was the first time she had come to talk with me. When she left


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I would simply lapse into the old blankness.¹⁵ As observed in the relationship between Mrs. D and Reverend Henry Revell, there is an expression here both of childish dependency and obscured sexuality; it is a kind of relationship that would not be as intense, or feel as meaningful, in a context outside of the world of the sick.

Chapter 3

The Role of the Imaginary Friend in *Someone Else Awake*

For Erin, her return to child-like attachment is a direct result of sleeplessness. Memories and behaviours of her younger years are deeply entwined with her current affliction; her insomnia and her experiences as a child are in constant dialogue with each other. Erin forms a complicated relationship – not least for its imaginary foundations – with Bridget. In its nature as fantasy, however, I suggest that Erin’s most successful remedy against her sleeplessness is reminiscent of the child-like defence mechanism of imagination as therapy. Cathy Caruth, in her study of trauma theory, *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), suggests that narratives of trauma describe not simply the pain of the event, but also ‘the unbearable nature of its survival.’\(^\text{16}\) Where Erin’s insomnia is caused by the events at Bryn Hen camp, and the guilt of what may have also happened to Sarah – vulnerability in the presence of an adult – she finds refuge from these experiences and their emotional after-effects through participating in a dream-like reality in which communicating with an idealised ‘adult’ becomes a means of self-reflection.

Bridget is created as a response to Erin’s childhood trauma as well as her struggle with sleeplessness. At its simplest, she exists as a kind of ‘imaginary friend’ – someone who helps to emphasise Erin’s regression into child-like fears and behaviours. In her study of imaginary friends, psychologist Marjorie Taylor explains


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that children ‘create imaginary companions as a response to traumatic life situations.’ In Erin’s case, Bridget initially appears in the novel as a way to cope with the sudden onset of sleeplessness. At first, Erin takes comfort in seeing a bedroom light across the road in the middle of the night: ‘And the way the woman was watching the street made Erin think that every house on her side of the street was dark, too; she must have felt as though she was the only person awake for miles. That was how Erin had been feeling’ (p. 22). She quickly invests the Bridget relationship with a sense of mutual understanding and child-like trust. When she begins to imagine their friendship, she finds she can sleep more easily after she ‘talks’ to Bridget. But as the novel progresses, the combination of Erin’s distress and the increase in flashbacks to her childhood offer clues to the reader as to Bridget’s imaginary state. Their relationship develops alongside scenes involving Erin’s mother to demonstrate Bridget’s function as an idealised maternal figure. For instance, in Chapter 4, I deliberately present Erin’s contrasting conversations with Bridget and with her mother. Bridget’s tone is consistently maternal and soothing: ‘“I think I can hear you walking around – why don’t you get into bed and we can chat for a while”’ (p. 60). Erin’s mother, on the other hand, is immediately confrontational: ‘“You’ll notice the television isn’t on,” Mum said. Erin winced’ (p. 74).

In Joan G. Robinson’s novel, When Marnie Was There (1967), we are similarly encouraged to examine the role of the imaginary friend. Here, Anna befriends the mysterious Marnie, who is revealed to be a kind of imaginary ghost of Anna’s grandmother. Their friendship is interesting for its curious, disjointed nature. As Taylor notes, ‘Some imaginary companions don’t show up when the child wants them to,’ which is demonstrated through Anna’s frequent exasperation at Marnie’s

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spontaneous appearances and disappearances (Taylor, p 19). In Someone Else Awake, Bridget’s ‘real’ presence as the woman across the road is occasionally at odds with Erin’s imaginary narrative. When Bridget’s son arrives in Chapter 9, for example, his presence disrupts Erin’s ability to have a conversation with her, and Erin’s distress demonstrates the dependency she now has placed on the idea and presence of Bridget. As soon as the son leaves, Bridget is deeply apologetic and gives a satisfactory explanation that allows Erin’s fantasy to continue: “‘No, it isn’t. I would have told you if I knew – he only told me he was coming when he’d stopped at a service station on the way here’” (p. 158). This conversation has a particularly affectionate tone; Erin is shown to be responding warmly to the maternal protection that Bridget provides.

In When Marnie Was There, Robinson includes clues as to the intangible nature of Marnie through her conversations with Anna. For instance, Robinson writes:

[Marnie] sprang up suddenly. ‘Bother! That was the bell, I must go.’

‘I didn’t hear anything.’

Marnie laughed as if she didn’t believe her. ‘You didn’t want to hear,’ she said. Anyone can hear our dinner bell halfway down the creek.’

Robinson complicates Marnie’s presence here: the dinner bell that Anna does not hear, and which does not exist, is a clue to the reader that Marnie is imaginary, and yet Marnie’s response still allows for the belief that she is real. This is an even more complex issue in the 2014 Studio Ghibli adaptation, in which both girls are animated as clearly as each other, and, at least for the first part of the film, it is difficult to suggest that Marnie is less solid than Anna.

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In Someone Else Awake, the reader is similarly provoked into questioning the relationship between Erin and Bridget. Bridget is never shown to the reader when Erin is ‘speaking’ to her. She exists tangibly as the woman across the road, and is described whenever Erin sees her, but the absence of any real contact with Erin brings her physicality into question. This disparity increases as the novel progresses; the house alarm scene in Chapter 9 brings Erin and Bridget together for the first time, and Erin is shown to be very nervous and uncomfortable because the encounter forcibly changes the way she imagines Bridget. In their subsequent conversation, it is noted that Bridget’s voice was ‘deeper than usual’ (p. 166). Furthermore, as Bridget begins to affect Erin’s repressed ideas and memories, there is a sense that Erin is losing the ability to separate the real from the imaginary. For example, in Chapter 8, Erin is about to explain that the weight of her duvet feels like ‘someone’ is sitting on her legs – a thought that is interrupted by Bridget before it can lead to a flashback of the camp (p. 146). In this way, Bridget is also the part of Erin that avoids remembering her trauma; she becomes a kind of defence mechanism against unwanted thoughts.

The sight of the bedroom light across the road becomes a symbol of comfort for Erin. After the initial imaginary scene in Chapter 3, in which Bridget’s phone number is posted through Erin’s letterbox, the mobile phone becomes another object that eases Erin’s sleeplessness. The light and the phone emphasise Erin’s child-like vulnerability at night; she is too fearful and watchful to sleep unless she has seen the light on in Bridget’s house – a sign that there is an adult keeping vigil – and has the reassurance of the mobile phone close to her pillow. Interestingly, an experiment carried out by Marjorie Taylor involved a group of children who were given a toy telephone and asked to call either their imaginary friend or pretend to talk to a real classmate of their choice. The children without an imaginary friend showed
hesitation, whereas those who had an imaginary friend ‘seemed comfortable pretending he or she was present’ (Taylor, p. 113). Indeed, the ease with which Erin brings physical objects into her imaginary experiences contributes to the blurring of real and hallucinatory or fantasy that becomes more and more frequent in Someone Else Awake.

While Bridget primarily serves as a response to Erin’s childhood trauma, the conversations help to untangle and calm the chaotic thoughts that accompany sleeplessness. In July 2016, The Guardian published an article on ‘cognitive shuffling’ – a method ‘invented’ by Luc Beaudoin which aims to cure insomnia through the process of mentally picturing a sequence of random objects. Assuming that a person’s sleeplessness is caused by obsessive worrying and negative thoughts, this method seeks to distract and settle the preoccupied mind. It is similar to the traditional ‘counting sheep’ idea. Erin’s conversations with Bridget work in much the same way: instead of focusing on her inability to sleep, she is directing her attention to the creation of a flowing dialogue.

Furthermore, as Marjorie Taylor notes in a case involving the US presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, it is not uncommon for adults to engage in fantasies as a kind of ‘intellectual exercise’ (Taylor, p. 146). Encouraged by her advisors, Clinton practised imaginary ‘motivational chats’ with Eleanor Roosevelt in order to prepare herself for speeches and subsequent criticism. While Erin’s attachment to her conversations with Bridget is of a more child-like, dependent nature, the prevalence of

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fantasies in adulthood suggests a common need to connect with idealised company. I show Erin to have a solitary life outside work; there is no suggestion of relationships besides her weekly phone calls with her mother. It is only through her conversations with Bridget that she expresses herself. Bridget serves to allow Erin to speak on a personal level – something that she is otherwise missing.

The World of Disease

Ultimately, then, Bridget is formed out of Erin’s isolation, which is exacerbated by her experience of insomnia. In Dr Oliver Sacks’ observation of post-encephalitic patients, *Awakenings* (1973), he describes symptoms of Parkinsonism and patients feeling ‘locked in’ their own bodies. This sense of imprisonment stands in contrast to Herzlich’s idea of illness-as-freedom. Sacks writes: ‘Common to all worlds of disease is the sense of pressure, coercion, and force; the loss of real spaciousness and freedom and ease; the loss of poise, of infinite readiness, and the contractions, contortions, and postures of illness: the development of pathological rigidity and insistence.’²¹ He identifies that illness exists in a separate realm to health, but, for Dr Sacks, it is a rather barren landscape. His account of post-encephalitic patients is often harrowing to read. In patient Rolando P., for example, Sacks describes his ‘completely motionless state…except for sudden, impulsive movements of his eyes’ (Sacks, p. 116). In Miss H., Sacks explains her compulsion to count to extraordinarily large numbers ‘before she would be allowed to stop thinking and sleep’ (Sacks, p. 131). There is a sense both of unrelenting thought and intensely restricted movement. Where the body refuses activity, the mind repeatedly focuses on one particular idea.

The world of disease, in this case, is both an endless expanse and a claustrophobic cell, a state of existence unlike anything a healthy person experiences.

Just as Sontag creates the concept of separate worlds in ‘Illness as Metaphor’, so Sacks’ ‘world of disease’ becomes ‘the kingdom of the sick’. All diseases belong to Sacks’ idea of a parallel world of the sick, but only a select few can be found in Sontag’s kingdom, where the romanticisation of the illness is the definitive feature. Such diseases are ones that permit a retreat from the ‘kingdom of the well’ while allowing the patient the majority of their normal functions. In other words, we romanticise illnesses that are not too difficult, nor too dreadful, to imagine in our otherwise healthy bodies.

So far in this commentary, I have included illness narratives and the criticism that focuses on the separate, liminal existence of a patient. Whether struggling for coherence on their deathbed or relating their world view through the distortion of mental illness, writers preoccupied by disease demonstrate the inevitable separation of the sick from the community of the healthy. Insomnia, I want to argue, presents a paradoxical shift in this concept, and is romanticised because it allows a dual existence of both absolute solitude and continued (though impaired) participation in normal society. Before this idea is examined in detail, however, it is worth analysing the emergence of cancer narratives.

In recent years, cancer, like sleep hygiene, has become increasingly present in popular medical discourse. Sontag proposes that it is an ‘inappropriate disease for romantic character’ (Sontag, p. 51) because, as Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret argue: ‘Cancer is so frightening that one often does not dare to speak of it, not even to
utter a word.’ 22 These are, however, opinions formed before the widespread use of social media and advertising. Now, discussions of cancer are almost inescapable. It has developed its own rhetoric: we frequently associate the disease with ideas of heroism, turning the hospital into the battlefield and the patient into a kind of warrior figure. Cancer and its treatments are commonly viewed as a threat to identity but, as business researchers Hollenbeck and Patrick illustrate, consumerism allows patients to ‘create new aspects of the self’ according to the promoted ideas of heroic strength and bravery.23 Brands which claim their products promote health and power reinforce the attractiveness of the warrior identity. And yet, for all that we are exposed to the romanticised cancer survivor, the disease itself fills us with terror. Fictional narratives of cancer, furthermore, often seek to separate the condition from its promoted image, presenting it with unflinching realism.

One of the most recent examples is Eimear McBride’s A Girl is a Half-formed Thing (2013). In this short novel, the protagonist relates her relationship with her brother. Suffering from a brain tumour during childhood, his condition suddenly worsens as he reaches the cusp of adulthood, and the protagonist gives an unflinching account of his accelerating deterioration and death. Unlike the vivid scenes uniting illness with freedom in The Magic Mountain and mental illness narratives, the brother’s condition is shown to be debilitating. He is anything but enriched by the aggressive tumour, and McBride shows in her narrator an emotional decomposition in parallel to her brother’s pathological breakdown. For example, when her brother begins chemotherapy, the protagonist witnesses his struggle with its side-effects, and


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describes the scene with a sense of pain beyond expression: ‘I put you to bed after
that. Rinse out your mouth and spit. Tuck. Lie there. Getting your breath. Sorry. It’s
feels you could be dead. Of this. Of sickness one more time.’

Whilst *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* certainly presents an extreme physical
and emotional spectrum in response to illness, the novel’s situation – for any of
McBride’s characters – does not in any way encourage morbid envy. There is only a
kind of contagious deterioration.

A recent popular preoccupation with sleep has emerged that also engages with
notions of distorted bodily perception. Newspaper articles, in particular, promote pre-
bedtime advice that paradoxically brings a self-consciousness to the process of sleep.
For example, an article published on *The Guardian* website in January 2016 lists
twelve habits to help achieve a good night’s sleep. It is a rather bizarrely-worded
piece, which includes tips such as ‘distract your brain’ and ‘fool your body into
thinking you’re tired’ by ‘faking a yawn or two’. It suggests that our bodies are
working against us, and that to fall asleep requires the same cunning as taking a cat to
the vet. There is a sense that sleep has become a process dissociated from physical
norms, something that is at the centre of a struggle between the mind and the body.
According to articles like this, the modern process of falling asleep is no longer a
simple matter of lying down at night; sleep is complex, elusive, and can require a
dozen tricks or more to accomplish. Indeed, the popularity of writing and reading

24 Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd.,
2014), p. 139.
25 Richard Wiseman, ‘Zzzzzzzzz … 12 simple steps to a good night’s sleep’, *The
Guardian*, 31 January 2016,
<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jan/31/12-rules-good-nights-sleep>
[accessed 6 February 2016].

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about sleep hygiene creates a vicious cycle in the frequency of sleepless nights. As David N. Neubauer identifies, ‘Insomnia exists only in comparison with what one considers to be normal sleep. With insomnia, sleep falls short of the expectation of how it should be experienced. People assess their sleep against a standard.’ The standard, as is frequently emphasised in popular medical discourse, is eight hours. This figure seems to loom over us at night: if we do not manage eight hours, we become self-conscious that something is wrong. Articles such as the one discussed above seek to aid the sleepless, but paradoxically turn sleep into an over-complicated and anxious performance.

Particularly at the beginning of the novel, Erin is almost obsessed with the idea of ‘normal’ sleep. She assesses herself as though the ability to sleep is a skill, and becomes increasingly focused on the time she spends sleeping, or lying awake: ‘She just had to find her usual position and concentrate on thinking about nothing. If she did that, she thought, she would still get seven hours of sleep. Seven was better than five. Plus she had had an hour before she jerked awake. Eight hours, then. She had read about getting eight hours; that was what the doctors recommended. That was a recommended amount of sleep to have’ (p. 18). Showing similarity to the popular news articles, Erin is gripped by the notion that sleep is quantifiable, and that she must achieve a minimum standard in order to be productive in the day. Ironically, as I demonstrate in Someone Else Awake, it is Erin’s intense focus on sleep as a performance that contributes to her ongoing sleeplessness.

As we have seen, literary depictions of illness often demonstrate the crossing of a boundary from one society, or ‘kingdom’, to another, and one identity to another. Insomnia, however, seems to exist on this threshold. Both the very nature of

sleeplessness and the insomniac’s place in society produces a dream-like duality. Insomnia allows for a reconstruction of identity – the sleepless becomes the hero in a nightly battle – but permits the afflicted to resume their daily routines without pressing fear of bodily disintegration. Summers-Bremner illustrates the paradoxical nature of the condition:

Sleepless thoughts mimic the natural infinity of the dream world, which their pace and proliferation stop the insomniac from reaching. And yet the insomniac is equally pressured by circumscription [sic], the agreed-upon time zone when most citizens sleep. Like the city that grows exponentially, creating material blockades – riots, crime and so on – to its idealized infinity, insomnia’s mode of increase shortens the night.27

Insomnia is dreaming without sleeping, and it is the frantic pressure to sleep in a seemingly endless night. More than this, however, insomnia – ironically echoing the liminal state of sleep – offers a temporary pass into the ‘kingdom of the sick’. The chronic insomniac, who consistently achieves only three or four hours of sleep each night, will continue to get up in a morning and attempt to function as normal throughout the day. Some might make their condition public information, but others may keep their sleeplessness as much of a secret as possible, unwilling to be defined or judged by their condition. Rather than be completely assimilated into an identity of illness, then, the insomniac adopts a twofold identity that sees them as ‘normal’ during the day and ‘sick’ at night.

Illness, including insomnia, is often portrayed in literature as inevitably forcing exile from a normal, healthy life. Eluned Summers-Bremner suggests that insomnia ‘makes us feel at once obsessed with our onward-rushing thoughts and yet at the same time insignificant – alone with our wakefulness, cut off from community […]’ (Summers-Bremner, p. 60). The insomniac becomes isolated from the rest of the world, and simultaneously participates in a solipsistic self-analysis. Neubauer describes this process as resulting in ‘emotional arousal’ and ‘psychological activation’ that only exacerbates the inability to sleep (Neubauer, p. 91). At night, then, when everyone else has temporarily retreated from life, the insomniac persists in their train of thought.

The romanticisation of illness in literature is possible because it allows us a glimpse into an exclusive, more emotionally complex, and therefore enviable, world. With the emergence of cancer narratives, however, our understanding of what it means to be sick is overshadowed by dread. We want to experience the singularity of illness, and to partake in its medical routines and rhetoric, but we do not want to be too ill. Tuberculosis and insanity offered a complete removal from society, but perhaps this is no longer an option in the twenty-first century. Only insomnia permits a daily commute between the ‘kingdom of the sick’ and ‘the kingdom of the well’. It changes cognitive function enough to step into the realm of illness, but as long as some sleep is achieved, it also allows for continued access into normal society. As Herzlich and Pierret illustrate: ‘Illness literally embodies our unsatisfactory relations with society, but this relationship must assume a material character, must affect nature by perverting it, before we can feel it in our bodies; and in fact, we are all affected in the same manner’ (Herzlich and Pierret, p. 115). Insomnia – at least, when it is triggered by emotional factors and shift-work – can reflect a sense of dissatisfaction
with social obligations. It is the physical manifestation of an excess of thought caused by the pressure of daily life.

Increasingly, the term ‘insomnia’, is used with gratuitous frequency particularly on social media websites. It has become interchangeable with sleeplessness; one night’s bad sleep is immediately exaggerated and labelled as chronic illness. Where a doctor’s diagnosis is usually the key to the world of illness, insomnia seems to allow the sufferer to bypass this process and admit themselves. It appears to be the only example of this cultural phenomenon. A person suffering with a chest infection, for instance, would not declare that they had tuberculosis. This in itself is part of the process of romanticising an illness; elevating one’s brief experience to that of a recognised chronic condition. Thomas G. Couser and Nancy Mairs argue that these acute, manageable illnesses offer ‘a more universal experience and [are] thus easier for readers to identify with.’ 28 We have all had difficulty sleeping, and when we read insomnia narratives, we recognise the symptoms described. As a ‘universal experience’, we empathise with protagonists of insomnia narratives; when these texts show a consciousness altered through illness, we look for this change in ourselves.

Sleeplessness, in my novel, is presented as both an exile and an admittance to a different kind of existence and community. Erin subscribes to popular medical discourse and routines of sleep hygiene, obsessing over her time spent asleep and the tools she gathers to help improve her sleep. I also demonstrate a shift in her way of thinking and communicating as her insomnia progresses. Her room and the space between her window and Bridget’s house is the microcosm of the ‘kingdom of the sick’, but Erin continues to function as best as she can in her daily life, assuming the

duality of existence previously described. Erin’s preoccupation with the discourse of sleep hygiene, however, does not alleviate her insomnia. It is through her imagined relationship with another insomniac that she finds some sort of aid. *Someone Else Awake*, therefore, both dismantles and reinforces the canon of romanticised illness. On one hand, it demonstrates the futility of adapting one’s behaviour to the popular routines of illness. On the other hand, it is through romanticising Bridget’s illness that Erin can come to terms with her own condition. As Arthur W. Frank describes, ‘In stories, the teller not only recovers her voice; she becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices. When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story.’

Chapter 4

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Alice Vernon
‘Tonight I shall strive hard to sleep naturally’: The Sleepless and the Parasomniac in Literature

In 350BC, Aristotle suggested that certain pathological characteristics could make one ‘addicted to sleep.’ Almost two thousand years later, Patricia Morrisroe, in her memoir *Wide Awake*, declares that sleep ‘broke [her] heart’ when she began to suffer insomnia. Our relationship with sleep, it seems, can trigger feelings of dependency as with a drug or a lover. We often personify sleep as fickle or sweet – an object of desire. Consequently, when it is difficult to fall asleep, we crave it with an almost maddening obsession. Conversely, when sleep brings issues of parasomnia such as night terrors and somnambulism, it becomes something to be feared. Unlike any other biological function, sleep in all its forms has been, and will continue to be, a frequent motif in literature. From the paranoid insomniac to the violent sleepwalker, characters emerging from the ambiguous and vulnerable state of sleep have frequently fascinated writers and unnerved readers.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, night was often considered an oppressive force. As explained by historian Sasha Handley in her book, *Sleep in Early Modern England* (2016), people ‘sought first and foremost to protect themselves from potential dangers, which stemmed from the sense of fragility and anxiety that sleep’s onset produced.’ Sleep was associated with a sense of vulnerability. With the threat of widespread and uncontrollable fires, all sources of light in houses were extinguished at bedtime. The darkness was absolute, making the home an ominous

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and dangerous environment. A. Roger Ekirch, in his influential study *At Day’s Close*, describes the prevalence of ‘impulsive violence, unplanned and sudden, due to the insecurity bred by darkness.’ Insomnia was commonly provoked by fear – fear of fire and of burglary – and by sickness (Ekirch, p. 288).

As Chaucer’s fourteenth-century text *The Book of the Duchess* demonstrates, sleep can be frustratingly unpredictable and sometimes deserts us for no apparent reason. Sitting up, the narrator reads stories of Morpheus, the god of sleep, and begins a long and pleading prayer, listing all the fantastical gifts he would offer in order to ‘slepe and have some reste.’ By distracting himself through reading, the narrator eventually falls asleep and wakes with the book still in his hand.

The patterns of sleep most likely observed by Chaucer and expressed in *The Book of the Duchess* had a different structure from contemporary patterns. The practice involving an hour or two of wakefulness in between periods of sleep, known as second or segmented sleep, allowed time for personal reflection when ‘distractions [were] so few and privacy so great’ (Ekirch, p. 310). I would argue that modern insomnia, which is commonly caused by depression and psychological trauma rather than sickness and concerns about security, brings a return to the practice of midnight thought. Instead of experiencing a brief period of wakefulness before resuming sleep, however, the insomniac remains in this state of undisrupted, solitary reflection for several hours. Where practitioners of the second sleep deliberately interrupted their sleep to spend time in private contemplation, such a situation is the source of much of the modern insomniac’s distress. The same thoughts are re-examined, causing pain as great as, or worse than, the biological effects of sleep loss.

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Whilst the widespread implementation of street lamps at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century banished many of night’s demons, fears continued to lurk in dark corners. Nineteenth-century Gothic fiction was a genre populated by troubled sleepers. Concerned with both mental and physical pathology, the Gothic presents characters tortured by illness, guilt, and fear - all of which re-emerge either through uncanny parasomnias or paranoid insomnia. In its exploration of liminal states, both geographically and psychologically, the Gothic is preoccupied with visions of intense solitude and endless wandering. The mysteries of sleep, itself a transitional space between waking and a kind of oblivion, proves to be a medium for supernatural possession and the emergence of another self which talks and acts during sleep. Conversely, the Gothic depicts a maddening sense of isolation and obsession with a single thought or image when sleep does not come at all.

According to David Punter, the Gothic was concerned with images of the ‘transcendent self’ and ‘the wanderer’ – a state frequently brought about by a lack of sleep.\textsuperscript{35} Sleep can be read as a crucial part of the Gothic aesthetic. Particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, attention was turned in the genre to lack of sleep as a symptom of guilt and paranoia. For example, in \textit{The Rime of the Ancient Mariner} (1798), Coleridge’s mariner is kept awake by remorse caused by the killing of the albatross. When his crewmates drop dead around him, the mariner is in absolute solitude, and when he tries to sleep he finds that his eyes ‘like pulses beat’ and thus he remains awake.\textsuperscript{36} Upon the mariner’s repentance and release from the body of the albatross, he is rewarded with ‘gentle sleep from Heaven,’ demonstrating the notion


that insomnia is a divine punishment and restful sleep is sent as a token of forgiveness (Coleridge, p. 58).

As the Gothic continued to evolve into the nineteenth century, insomnia is presented as a wholly personal and internal torture. Some excellent examples of this are seen in the work of Edgar Allan Poe, whose troubled protagonists are frequently wracked by hauntings and bodily terrors that originate within their own mind. In ‘The Premature Burial’ (1844), the Gothic connection between sleep and death is made explicit: the narrator relates tales of unfortunate souls whose deep and death-like slumber leads to them being buried alive. Suffering with catalepsy – a tendency to fall into trance states – the narrator is morbidly fearful that he, too, is fated to be prematurely buried. His obsession consumes him until he becomes too paranoid to sleep. Poe writes: ‘When nature could endure wakefulness no longer, it was with a struggle that I consented to sleep – for I shuddered to reflect that, upon waking, I might find myself the tenant of a grave.’37

Coleridge’s depiction of insomnia can be viewed as a God-given sentence that identifies the captain, the sole living among a ship full of the dead, as the guilty party. On the other hand, Poe’s ‘The Premature Burial’ argues that sleeplessness is self-inflicted. It is this idea of insomnia as a self-inflicted protection against the defenceless and exposed state of sleep that forms the psychological foundations of my novel.

As well as presenting the agonising condition of sleeplessness, the Gothic imagination also explored the phenomenon of parasomnias. In particular, somnambulism, or sleepwalking, was a popular trope for showing repressed and violent behaviour in male characters, and a susceptibility for vulnerable trance-like

states in women. The Society for Psychical Research in the late Nineteenth Century evidenced a widespread fascination with séances, the supernatural and mesmerism. Male mesmerists and female mediums would claim to provoke spirit possession when submerging the human mind into a kind of somnambulist trance. Critic Tatiana Kontou describes the female medium as ‘the bridge between two worlds, blurring the distinction between life and death, and fact and fiction’ – just as the state of sleep itself provides a passage between life and unconsciousness. What made somnambulism and hypnosis prime material for supernatural speculation was that it placed the sleeper on the thin threshold dividing these states. Neither alive and alert nor ‘dead’ in sleep, the somnambulist moved and communicated from an unreachable place.

Natural somnambulists, not to be confused with the (often fictional) narratives of mediums and mesmerists, frequently became the subjects of medical texts. For example, L.W. Belden, a physician from Massachusetts, wrote a detailed account of the somnambulist activities of a young woman in 1834. His choice of words to describe Jane C. Rider – whose episodes of sleepwalking involved a display of impeccable memory, and enabled her to move and perform routine duties with her eyes closed – encourages ideas of mystery and the paranormal. Belden writes: ‘Excitements of every kind, and particularly attempts to draw forth her peculiar powers, invariably prolonged the fits […].’ Paralleling the mesmerist inducing his female medium into an hypnotic state, Belden seems to take great enjoyment in devising experiments for Jane. In another instance, he explains that ‘the most respectable and intelligent gentlemen in town’ came to observe Jane in her episodes.

38 Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 3.
of sleepwalking, just as rational men of science would form the audience of a séance
(Belden, p. 58). Despite its recognition as a pathological condition, somnambulism for
Belden and numerous others was a chance to employ the same fascinated rhetoric as
the narratives produced by The Society for Psychical Research.

The curiosity evoked by reports of somnambulism was echoed in literature. In
Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), there is a strange scene in which
Angel Clare wanders in his sleep. Caused by the ‘mental distress’\(^{40}\) of discovering
Tess’ dark history with Alec D’Urberville, Clare seems to be animated by the
emotions he suppresses during their waking conversation. The sleepwalking Clare,
believing Tess to be dead, carries her outside and into the ruins of the Abbey. There,
he sets her down in ‘the empty stone coffin of an abbot’ (Hardy, p. 249). This scene is
somewhat heavy-handed in its foreshadowing, emphasising in several ways the
approaching death of Tess. Sleepwalking, then, becomes a convenient plot device for
communicating prophetic images, as well as demonstrating repressed behaviour in a
character. But it also, as David Punter suggests, emphasises the ‘inward’ focus of the
Gothic tradition, these stories are ‘confronting the loss of the body, the making over
of the body into the control and power of another’ (Punter, p. 61). Angel’s loss of
bodily control reveals another side to his character, and urges the reader to consider
whether the relationship with Tess is at its most intimate when Angel is unconscious.

Elsewhere in the Gothic, there are numerous examples of somnambulist
women whose actions seem to come not from their sleeping mind, but the mysterious,
mesmeric power of the villain. One of the most interesting cases can be found in
Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Itself the result of a nightmare experienced by Stoker,

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\(^{40}\) Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, ed. by Tim Dolin (London: Penguin
the quintessential vampire novel is also a detailed exploration of sleep and its many associated disorders.

As an epistolary novel, *Dracula* provides the opportunity for personal accounts given by each of Stoker’s characters, many of which explore the ways in which the threatening presence of the Count affects their sleeping patterns. For Mina Harker, however, the documentation of sleep – both her own and the sleep of others – becomes almost an obsession. She witnesses Lucy’s act of sleepwalking, and in describing it in her journal, begins the account thus: ‘No sleep now, so I may as well write. I am too agitated to sleep.’\(^{41}\) Sometimes Mina Harker’s sleep comes easily and is dreamless, but more often it ‘keeps aloof’ (Stoker, p. 277). As with the sleepers of previous centuries, Mina experiences a fear of being vulnerable while unconscious; she fears not only a visitation by the Count, but also how she might behave while in a somnambulic state.

She is wracked with guilt over Lucy’s fate, believing herself to be the trigger for Lucy’s somnambulism (Stoker, p. 274). For Mina, Lucy’s nighttime walk is understood to be the pivotal moment that her friend crossed a threshold into Dracula’s realm. Through watching another’s parasomnia, Mina’s own sleep is affected. From this point in the text, Mina is consumed by her preoccupation with the quality of her sleep. In *Someone Else Awake*, I present a similar obsession in Erin; she becomes fixated with time and the clock, and often tries to tally the number of hours she has spent asleep or awake. For example, on the night she first imagines Bridget, she attempts to soothe her mind by counting: ‘Frustrated, she gave up, and reached out towards her phone to check the time. It was almost midnight. She had been lying there counting in her head for almost two hours’ (p. 44).

When Mina begins to be visited by Dracula, she exhibits nearly every parasomniac condition. The first example appears to be a kind of sleep paralysis, in which Mina is overcome by a ‘leaden lethargy’ that ‘seemed to chain [her] limbs’ (Stoker, p. 275). Following the episode, she writes that she will ‘strive hard to sleep naturally’ (Stoker, p. 276), illustrating her need for healthy sleep and identifying the episode as akin to Lucy’s somnambulism. After she is attacked by the Count, her sleep is documented by others. In Jonathan Harker’s journal a few nights later, he describes being woken up by Mina ‘who was sitting up with a startled look on her face’ (Stoker, p. 330), and she exclaims that there is someone in the corridor. Upon being told that there is no one there but Quincey Morris on guard duty, Mina sighs and easily slips back into sleep. This half-awake, hallucinatory conviction of a dreadful presence bears all the traits of night terrors. The following morning, Mina demands to be hypnotized by Dr Van Helsing, and when she awakens from her trance-like state asks, “Have I been talking in my sleep?”, mimicking the childish obedience observed during Lucy’s episode of sleepwalking (Stoker, p. 333).

Mina’s symptoms of parasomnia seem to worsen in stages. Through sleep paralysis, she loses control of her limbs; through night terrors she appears to hallucinate frightening images; and finally, under hypnosis, she loses all autonomy and falls into the same state of somnambulism as Lucy. Numerous analyses of Stoker’s *Dracula* have focused on the spread of disease and degeneracy, but I believe there is evidence here to suggest that the vampirism in the novel is also a kind of contagious parasomnia. Dracula, for Mina, is a symbol of trauma and of guilt, and is associated in her mind with troubled and unnatural sleep. Moreover, she considers sleep as an external force that *comes* to her – in much the same way as she is visited by the Count – rather than recognising it as a bodily function originating within
herself. Returning to my previous point, sleep is a transitional space between wakefulness and an unconscious abyss, between life and death. Parasomnias, particularly when episodes are not remembered, can be a liminal state in which the body moves and exhibits personality and emotion, but the waking, rational self is effectively ‘dead’. Vampirism in Dracula, then, is a physical existence between life and death, and between wakefulness and sleep. Dracula has become a stereotypical figure of the undead, but beyond the fangs and blood he is also a kind of synecdoche for disruptive and abnormal sleep disorders.

If Dracula can be viewed a Gothic manifestation of parasomnias, then it is important to note that he is stopped by a manifestation of science. As Regenia Gagnier identifies, ‘information, science, and technology triumphs’ over the supernatural and folkloric terror of the night.\(^4^2\) Three years after the release of Dracula, at the beginning of the new twentieth century, Sigmund Freud published his influential text The Interpretation of Dreams (1900). Introducing his main theory using one of his own dreams as an example, Freud proposed that the seemingly bizarre and unconnected symbols of dreams could be scientifically decoded and translated. Using his method of psychoanalysis, Freud demonstrated that most dreams could be interpreted as a kind of ‘wish fulfilment’, whether that is a physical craving or a moral desire – such as to be ‘acquit[ted]…of responsibility’.\(^4^3\) Like a biological symptom of disease, Freud suggested that dreams were a re-emergence of unprocessed traumas and desires, as well as a sign of a malignant psychological condition.

Freud’s tone reflects a lingering sense of the previous century. For example, in discussing the reportage of dreams, Freud warns that ‘one has to reveal oneself as the sole villain among all the noble souls’ (Freud, p. 334) – a phrase reminiscent of Mina’s anxiety over her parasomniac activity. Furthermore, he explains that dreams are peculiar for their ‘distortion’, ‘disguise’ and for the dreamer’s ability to ‘mask’ himself in true Gothic fashion (Freud, p. 52). Existing in a kind of transitional space, *The Interpretation of Dreams* marks a shift in the preoccupation with sleep from its use in Gothic storytelling to occupying its own branch of scientific interest.

Dreams and parasomnias form an important part of *Someone Else Awake*. They create an increasing sense of threat, allow for the unravelling of flashbacks and memory, and help to suggest that Erin’s sleeplessness is a kind of vigilance against danger. The novel begins with Erin’s vivid experience of sleep paralysis: ‘Erin woke with a weight on her body’ (p. 2). This scene, constructed as a prologue, also serves as a manifestation of the memories of her childhood trauma. As Caruth explains, the re-emergence of memories through dreams ‘is not the signal of the direct experience, but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place’ (Caruth, p. 62). Erin can only begin to remember what has happened to her when the experiences repeat themselves through dreams, her fears manifesting as episodes of sleep paralysis. Her sleeplessness, therefore, emerges from the desperate need she felt as a child at Bryn Hen to stay awake and vigilant through the night.

Recent research into the effects of trauma on sleeping habits has shown that 70 – 90% of PTSD patients suffer with some sort of sleep disturbance, most commonly
insomnia or nightmares.\textsuperscript{44} Sleep psychologists, Victor I. Spoormaker and Paul Montgomery, illustrate that disturbed sleep, including nightmares, can be both a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder and a factor that exacerbates the condition. They speculate that ‘persons with nightmares and other intense and vivid dreams are more vulnerable to dream about the traumatic event and develop insomnia and PTSD as a consequence.’\textsuperscript{45}

Throughout \textit{Someone Else Awake}, I depict Erin as having always had an active imagination and a propensity to distinctive dreams. For instance, in Chapter 7, I include a flashback to Erin’s childhood, describing the vivid nightmares that follow the incident at the camp and which are triggered by the rattling wheel in the gerbils’ cage. The dreams are consistent in theme and subject, and accumulate detail each time they recur: ‘The next few times she dreamt about the woods, the presence would come closer and closer’ (p. 112). When Erin sees the girl asleep in the library – something that reminds her of the camp – her nightmares and subsequent sleeplessness begin again, twenty years after the traumatic event. Indeed, for Erin, part of the trauma comes from the resulting disturbed sleep.

As the novel progresses, and Erin begins to remember more about the camp, she dreams and hallucinates more frequently. In Chapter 10, for example, after confronting the old man from the library, Erin sees a hand on her pillow (p. 181). I use these scenes not only to emphasise the re-emergence of Erin’s trauma, but also to complicate the boundary between the real and the imaginary in the novel. The narrative voice describes what Erin sees and experiences without confirming the

reality of the scene. Particularly when Erin responds to a bad dream or an episode of sleep paralysis by imagining a conversation with Bridget, I present both the hallucination and the conversation with the same degree of tangibility: “It was on my bed, Bridget. I saw it” (p. 182). This is an important narrative choice; Erin’s trauma is partially formed from not being believed when she told her story to her family, thus the reader is forced to assess their own ability to understand the truth beneath the confusion of Erin’s experiences.

Recent exposure of the research on post-traumatic stress has encouraged a new wave of fiction exploring the ways in which past experiences continue to affect sleep. In Anne Enright’s 2007 novel, The Gathering, for example, insomnia is suffered by the protagonist Veronica Hegarty. Her sleeplessness takes a self-destructive path designed to induce guilt. Rather than a lingering symptom of childhood trauma, it is as though Veronica’s insomnia is a self-imposed condition that allows her to isolate herself and bitterly criticise her own actions in the night. For instance, she begins to drive her car instead of staying in bed, parking in dark and lonely places to ‘wait to be killed,’ relishing the feeling of ‘abandoning her children while they sleep’ (Enright, p. 150). Enright demonstrates not just the disrupted sleep of Veronica, but also the unprotected sleep of her children.

Freud’s attempt at understanding the process of dreaming was part of a wave of psycho-physiological analysis given to sleep during the early twentieth century. A lesser-known psychologist, Sante De Sanctis, for example, published Dreams: Psychological and Clinical Studies of an Alienist in 1899 and continued to contribute manuscripts of dream psychology until his death in 1935. These texts brought

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47 Renato Foschi et al., ‘Sante De Sanctis (1862 – 1935), a forerunner of the 20th century research on sleep and dreaming’, Sleep Medicine, 16 (2015), 197-201, p. 198
renewed interest in sleep, but were affected by the lack of technology available to provide evidence for the theories presented. Indeed, sleep researchers Foschi et al. describe De Sanctis’ work as ‘limited by his time’, and suggest that ‘the progress of scientific knowledge of experimental techniques to study dreams were characterized by a psycho-physiological approach, without a clear neurophysiological precision’ (Foschi et al., p. 198). Nevertheless, these works may have influenced the increased interest in sleep that led to the creation of the electroencephalogram (EEG) a few decades later.
As the twentieth century progressed, technologies for measuring and understanding sleep were beginning to be developed. It was rapidly becoming a respected scientific field, and the liminal state was the subject of both biological and literary experimentation. According to neurophysiologist T. Deboer, the modern era of sleep research ‘began with the technology that allowed electrophysiological monitoring of sleep’ and the invention of the electroencephalogram by Hans Berger in 1929. At the same time, as Oliver Sacks illustrates in *Awakenings* (1973), the 1920s epidemic of *encephalitis lethargica* – “sleeping sickness” – showed the medical world that ‘sleep was a physiological necessity’ (Sacks, footnote p. 14). Revolutionary scientific developments at this time not only produced interpretable images of neurological patterns, but also demonstrated our physical dependency on sleep.

Fictional presentations of sleep in the twentieth century abandoned the supernatural aesthetic of the Gothic in favour of reflecting an emerging understanding of the brain’s rhythms. In 1969, Georges Perec published *La Disparition*. Translated by Gilbert Adair into *A Void* in 1994, Perec’s novel follows the story of Anton Vowl, a man crippled by insomnia. A bizarre, dream-like book, *A Void* never uses the letter ‘E’. Vowl’s insomnia is established from the opening paragraph as having a complicated relationship with language and communication. Giving up on his attempt to sleep, Vowl tries to read, but the plot is ‘impossibly difficult to follow’ and its vocabulary ‘too whimsically multisyllabic.’ In the mid-twentieth century, sleep was no longer explored for its uncanny, personality-altering states, but for its connection to, and effect on, language. Similarly, *Someone Else Awake* highlights the ways in

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which modes of communication and topics of discussion differ at night, and how Erin’s steadily worsening tiredness changes her ability to process spoken and written language.

As the twentieth century progressed, sleep research began to involve experimentation on the sleeping patterns of rodents. In particular, the 1970s saw a wave of neuroscientists using rats to understand mammalian sleep habits. Zepelin and Rechtschaffen provided the hypothesis that sleep ‘promotes longevity’ in 1974.\(^{50}\) Subsequently, in 1976, Allison and Cicchetti sought to understand ecological and predatory instincts on animals’ sleep (Lesku et al., p. 1026). For the first time, extensive research was conducted in an attempt to visualise the evolutionary similarities, and cultural differences, between the sleep of humans and animals. These experiments used ever-developing technological resources, from mapping a person’s EEG to measuring the wheel rotations and heat radiation inside a rat’s cage (Deboer, p. 1228).

Representations in literature of this advancing sleep research were not limited to novels. In the *Peanuts* comic strip towards the end of the twentieth century, Charles M. Schulz played with the visual representation of sleep. It is through sleep that *Peanuts* acknowledges itself as a fictional comic; sleep becomes a kind of transitional bridge linking the page to the reader. As seen in Fig. 1, Schulz experiments with the signifier of the letter ‘Z’, arranging it in complex mathematical equations, as a physical object in the panel, and as half-awake responses to dialogue.\(^{51}\)

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Peppermint Patty is a character for whom sleep is a personality quirk, rather than a mere biological function. In a particular story arc in September 1983, Patty, renowned for falling asleep during class, is sent to a sleep disorders centre to be tested for narcolepsy. It is interesting that, only a decade after the establishment of the first sleep research centre in Stanford, California, Schulz would include such a detailed glimpse into the study of sleep. The humour in this section surrounds Patty (and a reluctant Snoopy) nervously going through the process of scientific investigation, all of which turns out to be harmless. In fact, during her class report, Patty yells, ‘No, kid, they didn’t attach any wires to my nose!’\(^{52}\) Patty’s supposed narcolepsy is simply caused by staying up too late waiting for her father to return home from work. Here, Schulz seems to use his platform to explain sleep research to young readers. Whilst Patty is at first apprehensive, Schulz demonstrates that there is nothing to fear, using Patty’s experience to support those children who suffer similar sleep disorders. Where Schulz participated in experimenting with the fictional presentation of sleep and sleeplessness, he also acted as a kind of approachable, reassuring guide to the developments in sleep research.

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Alice Vernon
In the twenty-first century, a new wave of insomnia narratives emerged. Pre-nineteenth-century sleeplessness, as described by Ekirch, was frequently caused by anxiety over what lurked in the total darkness outside; contemporary studies, by contrast, have shown that modern insomnia is exacerbated by artificial light, by ‘TV and computer use for social networking.’ In other words, the rapid evolution of technology in the last decades has undone the improvements to sleep security developed over the preceding two hundred years. This is not, of course, the only emerging cause of twenty-first-century insomnia. Urban noise, over-stimulation by caffeine, and work-related stress contribute to the new sleep crisis. The sudden boom in sleeping pills and aids, as well as the consistently frequent inclusion of sleeping advice and possible insomnia treatments in newspapers, emphasises the rise in the sleepless population.

In the literature of the last thirty years, the presentation of sleep is evident in every genre. Jonathan Coe’s *The House of Sleep* (1997), for example, is a work of literary fiction exploring the way the sleeping habits of a group of ex-students connects them to the sleep research centre established in their old shared house. It focuses on Sarah, who suffers with dreams indistinguishable from reality, and Terry, an insomniac who ‘is always tired…and never tired.’ Coe investigates in detail how sleep disorders affect the lives of his characters.

Interestingly, Coe suggests that Terry’s insomnia is the reason for his success as a film critic. Rather than display a paranoid obsession with his lack of sleep, Terry, in conversation with the sleep lab’s Dr Dudden, explains that “instead of going to bed, I’d stay up all night. Watching videos. And that was really how it began” (Coe,

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Terry’s sleeplessness allows him access to several extra hours in his day; hours which he fills by consuming media. The common desire to have more time to read books or watch films is a reality for Terry, and his career benefits, rather than suffers, as a result of his sleep deprivation. In other words, Coe seems to present insomnia as an attractive, enviable state.

The presentation of sleep in Someone Else Awake draws from the canon of literature examined in this section. I explore the idea that insomnia is caused by the sense of vulnerability it elicits in the protagonist. Just as Mina Harker’s relationship with sleep becomes obsessive after witnessing Lucy in a somnambulistic state in Dracula, the traumatic event in Erin’s childhood is triggered as she watches a child sleeping in the library. I present the idea that to sleep is to be exposed, and that Erin’s insomnia is a kind of vigil, defending her against a repeat of past events. Despite the security of her home and the well-lit streets, there is a sense that night time is the same ‘haunting terror’ it was for humanity before the development of streetlamps (Ekrich, p. 3).

As with modern depictions of post-traumatic stress, Erin’s insomnia is fuelled by her anxiety to sleep. Flashbacks permeate her confused, half-awake state, and it is through these remembered sensations and images that she untangles the reasons for her sleeplessness, revisiting her childhood fear and coming to depend on her imagined connection with another woman for a sense of stability. Furthermore, Erin’s conversations, both at work and with Bridget, experiment with disconnected, abstract and confused syntax. Where writers in the twentieth century explored sleep’s impact on language in their depictions of sleep, I present in Erin’s sleep-deprived and muddled handling of speech a similar lack of self-control.
Identifying Insomnia as the Modern Pathological Preoccupation in Literature and Culture

In *The Fall of Sleep* (2007), French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy argues that ‘sleep conquers us.’ He describes sleep in a somewhat violent way, suggesting that it is invincible. For many people, however, sleep is not an oppressive force, but rather an elusive state which constantly shifts. Recent literature, both fictional and autobiographical, has seen a renewed attempt to describe the fickleness of sleep and the torment of insomnia.

Nancy tries to capture the very moment – the metaphorical ‘fall’ – at which the mind becomes unconscious. He defines sleep as ‘relinquished vigilance’ and a ‘fall of tension’ that suggests a condition of trust and safety (Nancy, pp. 2-3). To fall asleep, in other words, is to willingly surrender to a vulnerable state. As we have already seen, some forms of insomnia, then, could be a kind of compulsive vigilance. But in a relatively safe, first-world society where insomnia narratives are popular, the night is rarely a threatening presence. In identifying sleeplessness, Nancy proposes that it is caused by a refusal to recognise the power of the night. He describes sleep, by contrast, as ‘the recognition of night’, and even as ‘night itself’ (Nancy, p. 22).

Nancy’s examination of sleep comes from a position of respect: he treats the force of sleep and the boundary between day and night with a sense of reverence. As A. Roger Ekirch describes, ‘Night was man’s first necessary evil’ (Ekirch, p. 3). Modern society, however, has taken away much of night’s power to dictate human behaviour. Electric lights, shift work, and twenty-four hour broadcasting means that the night no longer compels people to sleep for lack of anything else to do. By

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Alice Vernon
allowing daytime productivity to eat away into the darkness of night, Nancy argues that humans are bringing insomnia upon themselves. He describes the modern situation as ‘nights stripped of their very night’ – suggesting that by using the hours of the night for things other than resting, we are making a mockery of sleep (Nancy, p. 39). Modern society may give us more freedom over how we spend the night and when we go to bed, but at the cost of losing control over when we actually sleep. If anything, by blurring the threshold between day and night, we are endangering our ability to sleep at all. Sleep and night cease to share common ground.

In The Fall of Sleep, Nancy expresses the transition into the unconscious state with a writing style that is rambling and repetitive. For example, the opening sentences to his text seem to tumble over the idea of ‘falling’: ‘I’m falling asleep. I’m falling into sleep and I’m falling there by the power of sleep’ (Nancy, p. 1). In writing about sleep and sleeplessness, Nancy employs the language patterns of the half-awake mind, which suggests that sleep elicits a special form of creativity. By allowing his description of sleep to incorporate this idiosyncratic style of writing, he uses language to mimic the unconnected thoughts of the sleeper. It is only through accessing the threshold between sleep and wakefulness that Nancy can find the means to describe it.

When nighttime and sleep no longer work in harmony, the insomniac’s perception of their body and of time becomes dysfunctional. In his book, Phenomenology of Perception (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty encourages the reader to reconsider physical sensations. By being self-aware of ordinary habits and surroundings, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we can ‘define them anew.’⁵⁶ One of the purposes of literary narratives is to present a unique view of the world; taking a refreshed focus on physical conditions can offer interesting descriptions that are new

but instantly recognisable to readers. Illness, for Merleau-Ponty, forces a disruption of ordinary perceptions and, like the state of sleep, it is a ‘complete form of existence’ (Merleau-Ponty, p. 110).

Merleau-Ponty frequently draws similarities between sleep and illness. He argues that ‘the sleeper is never completely enclosed in himself, never fully asleep, and the patient is never absolutely cut off from the intersubjective world, never fully sick’ (Merleau-Ponty, p. 167). In both sleep and illness, there is a link to the realm of waking and of health, to the ‘real world’ (Merleau-Ponty, p. 167). Despite being a combination of illness within sleep, insomnia places the sufferer on a different plane of perception. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that illness does not simply provoke a shift in bodily perception, but rather submerges the patient in a world that has ‘lost its plasticity’ (Merleau-Ponty, p. 133). Moreover, he describes the night as ‘pure depth without planes, without surfaces, and without any distance from it to me’ (Merleau-Ponty, p. 296). Illness might loosen a patient’s understanding of the world, but night dissolves the world completely. To be ill, but still able to sleep, allows the patient to maintain a position in the world regardless of how distorted their perception has become. Viewed in the light of Merleau-Ponty’s theories, insomnia becomes, therefore, a peculiar state because the link to the ‘real world’ becomes blurred. The insomniac is exposed to the personality-dissolving, warped mass of the night without being able to take refuge in sleep. Symptoms of exhaustion then manifest, further disturbing the insomniac’s self-perception during the day.

Insomnia’s disruption of perception invites an equal disruption of language in order to describe it. It could be said, then, that insomnia provokes a new kind of creativity to represent the experience in a narrative form. Further to this idea, in his cultural study *At the Borders of Sleep* (2012), Peter Schwenger proposes that sleep
and literary narratives share the same unpredictability and transience of thought. He explains that ‘every literary narrative flickers at its edges with unpredictable associations. Any page of a novel is a threshold zone, whose words simultaneously partake of the waking and the dreaming worlds.’ His claim recalls the style of Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Fall of Sleep*: Nancy emphasises the link between sleep and reading, demonstrating their relationship by disrupting accepted norms of the text. Schwenger argues that the rhythm of reading each line could be compared to the steady breathing of sleep; the more involved a reader becomes in the words of the text, the less aware they are of their surroundings, just as a sleeper becomes cut off from the waking world the further they drift into unconsciousness.

If reading mimics the experience of falling asleep, how might narratives of insomnia complicate this relationship? Perhaps, much like the expectation to fall asleep without difficulty when a person has not experienced insomnia, the reader takes for granted that a novel or text will follow certain rules and a certain progression of plot. As Schwenger suggests, reading mimics falling asleep only when a text employs a recognisable narrative pattern and when sleep comes quickly and is undisturbed. But Schwenger also recognises that achieving sleep is not always as easy as reading a novel. When sleep is elusive, the same thoughts are often repeated relentlessly, which leads to ‘the evacuation of all meaningfulness from the words’ (Schwenger, p. 68).

Despite the tortuous repetition of insomnia, sleeplessness seems to have a particular hold on the imagination. Schwenger, like Merleau-Ponty, suggests that insomnia allows the sufferer to experience a different, distorted perception of the world around them – a ‘nocturnal revelation’ that ‘comes notably to the writer’

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(Schwenger, p. 75). Just as insomnia is a struggle against the seemingly easy descent into sleep, so narratives of insomnia, demonstrate a similar disruption of expected patterns of language.

For readers who have no trouble sleeping, the intriguing sentence structures and strange combinations of images deployed in insomnia narratives can make the condition seem enviable. In Richard Gwyn’s autobiography and illness memoir, The Vagabond’s Breakfast (2011), for example, he describes himself as suffering from ‘brain fog’, where he becomes unable to ‘experience life directly.’\(^58\) His language conjures some sort of fantasy realm of darkness and inhospitable landscapes emerging from the mundane: he sees things from a ‘periphery’ overlooking an ‘uncharted chasm’ (Gwyn, p. 29). The Vagabond’s Breakfast describes much of Gwyn’s insomnia; his current sleeplessness seems to be a focal point to which he frequently returns, but the book as a whole is more of a general autobiography. Furthermore, his text describes the strange landscape of insomnia with relatively normal language patterns.

Rather than show a progression of some kind of plot or idea, a narrative of insomnia stagnates around the same ideas as the insomniac repeats the same thoughts over and over again. This can be identified in Blake Butler’s memoir Nothing (2011), in which many of his descriptions of sleeplessness linger over a single motif or phrase. For example, in discussing the performance (or non-performance?) anxiety of going to bed, Butler seems to scare himself into writing in circles: ‘Even the fear of having trouble sleeping, or the fear of the fear of it, the fear of drifting off into something stuck beyond our self, the want for nowhere, for a silence, becomes stronger, fills through the body via the same corridors of emotions such as want or

love.’\textsuperscript{59} Not only does Butler repeat the word ‘fear’ four times here, but he also seems to struggle to get to the point of what he is trying to communicate. If, as Schwenger proposes, reading is akin to falling asleep, then Butler manages to translate the anguish of insomnia by meandering and drawing out the sentence. What should be a simple idea becomes an extended, rambling journey through deviations, repetition and reiterations. It is reminiscent of the sensation of not being able to ‘find’ sleep, of not being in the right position or of doing the right performance prior to getting into bed, of overcomplicating the very act of falling asleep.

Blake Butler’s \textit{Nothing} is a narrative that exists solely to document his sleeplessness. Its sub-title is \textit{A Portrait of Insomnia} – where ‘portrait’ already recalls ideas of artistic interpretation and an object that is inherently creative. Butler’s narrative style is reminiscent of Jean-Luc Nancy’s \textit{The Fall of Sleep}. As already demonstrated, Butler uses an eccentric syntax that represents the slurred speech of exhaustion and the rambling thoughts of the insomniac. Interestingly, however, Butler explicitly argues that his text does not serve to romanticise insomnia. He writes: ‘If this sounds romantic, or transcendent, it is not – or at least not mostly, for the true chronic, as the silent weight quickly begins to pile up’ (Butler, p. 117). Yet, just by existing as an original text, Butler shows that insomnia has encouraged some sort of creative outburst that would not have happened if not for his sleeplessness.

The potentially creative nature of insomnia is therefore something of a paradox. Insomnia, as presented by Butler, involves a complete breakdown in language, and may be considered artistic because of its incoherence. The disintegration of his prose reaches a point where it is no longer using letters at all: a page towards the end is filled with rows of right square bracket symbols (Butler, p. 

It becomes frustratingly unreadable. For that reason, I chose not to use a similar style when showing Erin’s worsening exhaustion. The novel is written in third person to blur the distinction between what Erin believes to be real and imaginary, but it also enables more control over the narrative voice to maintain comprehension even when Erin has difficulty expressing herself. Nevertheless, her dialogue, particularly during conversations with Bridget, becomes increasingly inarticulate as she leaves sentences unfinished and stumbles over her words. Erin and Bridget frequently finish each other’s thoughts, or repeat each other in a way that reflects the cycle of sleepless thoughts. During the scene in which Erin is troubled by the tingling sensation in her legs, for example, Bridget says, “It could be exhaustion”, and Erin replies, “It could be” (p. 144). This recurrence of thought, in addition to the rambling and disjointed lines of speech spoken by Erin, presents insomnia’s effect on language while allowing the third-person narrative to maintain a coherent approach.

Over the course of Someone Else Awake, Erin returns to the idea of water to describe how she is feeling. Sparked by the book about whales that falls off Hannah’s lap at the very start of the novel – the moment that triggers Erin’s sleeplessness – the motif of the sea and of submergence into water is one that repeats frequently throughout the text. As with Butler’s tendency to become stuck on a single phrase, I wanted to include an image that becomes noticeably repetitive as Erin becomes more and more tired. The distortion of sight and sound due to her exhaustion reminds Erin of being underwater: when Pat is concerned about Erin’s health, for instance, or when the neighbour’s warped image appears in the front door when Erin confronts him about his noisy children. Not only is the motif of water an accurate metaphor for the sensations and distorted perceptions brought about by insomnia, but it also works to represent Erin’s feelings of being overwhelmed.
Erin is both lethargic and alert; she is confused and forgetful, but she is also vigilant and tense. It is only when she focuses on her imagined conversations with Bridget and so provides her memories with a narrative, that she becomes more anchored and controlled in her language. Her insomnia has forced her to be creative, and through this creativity she finds a route back to what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘real world’.
The Undead Insomniac in Literature

In addition to autobiographical insomnia narratives, a new fictional trend explores the idea of sleeplessness as a contagious disease. Recalling some of the conventions of zombie fiction, texts such as Charlie Huston’s *Sleepless* (2010) and Kenneth Calhoun’s similar novel *Black Moon* (2014) demonstrate the way in which sleep is a delicate threshold that separates humanity from monstrosity.

An exaggerated image of the sleepless person can be easily compared to the zombie of popular culture. As critics Jen Webb and Sam Byrnand illustrate, one of the most disturbing aspects of the zombie is the way in which it ‘takes us to “the other side” – alienation, death, and what is worse than death: the state of being undead.’

Both the zombie and the insomniac occupy a kind of non-space, in which they experience isolation from a basic human function. Where the zombie is denied death and must exist in a purgatorial ‘undead’ state, the insomniac is denied sleep and spends the night in a similar kind of ‘unsleep’.

One of the precursors for modern zombie narratives – and a figure who, ironically, has often been reanimated in subsequent fiction – can be identified in the monster of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1816). A creature created from a patchwork of human remains by Victor Frankenstein, the monster is a key example of a character walking the boundary between life and death. In addition to this, however, Shelley shows the tormented relationship the monster has with sleep. Initially, the monster describes his experience of being ‘overcome into sleep’ in a relatively peaceful

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manner. But after his traumatic experience with the De Lacey family, the monster is made acutely aware of his otherness and his existential isolation from the rest of humanity. This is a turning point for the monster’s character, provoking his violent course of revenge on Frankenstein and his family. It also marks a point in which Shelley draws emphatic attention to the monster’s relationship with sleep. Following his rejection by De Laceys, Shelley writes:

When night came I quitted my retreat and wandered the wood; and now, no longer restrained by the fear of discovery, I gave vent to my anguish in fearful howlings. I was like a wild beast that had broken the toils, destroying the objects that obstructed me and ranging through the wood with a staglike swiftness. Oh! What a miserable night I passed! The cold stars shone in mockery, and the bare trees waved their branches above me; now and then the sweet voice of a bird burst forth amidst the universal stillness. All, save I, were at rest or in enjoyment; I, like the archfiend, bore a hell within me, and finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin (Shelley, p. 171).

This passage demonstrates a strong similarity between life-in-death and insomnia. Interestingly, here Shelley combines images of death and sleep. The ‘bare trees’ and the ‘universal stillness’, for example, provoke ideas of decay and of a barren environment. On the other hand, the passage similarly represents dormancy and the tranquillity of sleep. There is death here, but there is also life and life at temporary

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rest. The monster recognises that he does not belong to any of these categories. Indeed, the monster becomes active at night – ‘secured...from the view of man’ (Shelley, p. 176) – but moving through the darkness only exacerbates his sense of isolation. For the monster, the sense of stillness and sleep at night is a state permitted only to the living. In becoming aware of his own monstrosity, he becomes at odds with his own need to rest.

Following this tumultuous night, the monster does continue to sleep, but Shelley draws attention to its fitfulness and poor quality. The monster talks of a ‘fever’ in his blood that disrupts his rest, and he wakes up ‘exhausted’ (Shelley, pp. 172-173). Shelley demonstrates that the fragility of the threshold between life and death stands in parallel to the states of sleep and waking. The monster is cursed to exist on the boundary, and where he is denied a natural death he is similarly barred from natural, restorative sleep. This relationship between sleep and death, then, may be an early influence on the recent preoccupation with insomnia-as-virus narratives.

The ‘social alienation’ (Webb and Byrnard, p. 85) of the undead in popular culture is reminiscent of the night-time exile of Shelley’s monster. In Calhoun’s Black Moon (2014) and Huston’s Sleepless (2010), however, the similarity between sleeplessness and the undead state becomes explicit. Calhoun, for example, describes his horde of insomniacs as ‘stroll[ing] down the hallways at all hours, some verbalizing their delusions in mangled sentences or crashing into the walls...’ 62 Similarly, in Sleepless, the affected are described with reference to the shuffling zombies of modern horror fiction: ‘A few sleepless walking aimlessly, scratching their heads, rubbing their eyes, talking to themselves.’ 63 Both of these texts use extreme symptoms of insomnia – demonstrating what David Neubauer describes as

‘visual misperceptions’, ‘confusion’, and ‘blurred and double vision’ – to emphasise the insomniac-as-zombie image (2003, p. 52).

**Buying Our Way to Sleep**

Virus narratives frequently function as a vehicle for social criticism. Often, there is an allusion to environmental issues or a cynical mockery of privileged suburban living, but such texts always draw attention to the horde’s need to consume. The main argument of Webb and Byrnand is that modern zombie narratives hinge on a criticism of ‘capitalist competition’ in which the zombie exists ‘to gain more and more’ (Webb and Byrnand, p. 90). With this in mind, the insomnia-as-virus narratives may seek to add to this conversation by presenting the sleepless as consumers who shop to distract themselves from their own exhaustion.

Recognition of the link between consumerism and insomnia offers a criticism of a twenty-four-hour society which enables spending at all hours of the day. What is made less explicit in these narratives is the way in which people in privileged societies are encouraged to buy themselves to sleep. The promotion of non-medicinal products as sleep aids has become increasingly prevalent; in 1934, for example, the Wander Company gave a grant to the University of Chicago to test the benefits of drinking Ovaltine before bedtime. The results of the study were non-conclusive, but, as critic Kenton Kroker describes, ‘The manufacturer immediately initiated an advertising campaign complete with individual testimonies, to the effect that researchers at the University of Chicago had confirmed that Ovaltine brought on
The quest for perfect sleep has become a lucrative industry: according to Patricia Morrisroe, ‘Americans spend $23.9 billion a year on goods and services related to sleep’ (Morrisroe, p. 156). Indeed, over the course of Morrisroe’s memoir and cultural investigation of sleep *Wide Awake*, she spends money on everything from an ambient noise machine to a stay in Lapland’s ice hotel.

While Morrisroe demonstrates that nothing she buys benefits her sleep, there is a sense she is easily persuaded by (and has the money to throw at) the latest sleep aids. I aimed to present a similar preoccupation in my novel, where Erin’s immediate response to her sleeplessness is that she owns the wrong things to sleep properly. Influenced by a consumerist culture that promotes spending money on expensive mattresses and herbal supplements designed for better sleep, Erin initially believes that investing in her bedroom environment and night-time routine will improve her quality of sleep. I soon demonstrate, however, that such acquisitions do not help at all. Erin’s sleeplessness is a direct result of an unresolved internal trauma, and it is only through forming the habit of talking to Bridget that she finds her way back to sleep.

Prior to the twenty-first century trend for hyperbolic viruses in fiction, Gabriel García Márquez presents insomnia as a contagious illness in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). A woman, Visitación, arrives in secluded Macondo after fleeing the fatal insomnia sickness in her own neighbouring town. A short while later, she sees the mysterious and sickly child Rebeca ‘with her eyes lighted up in the darkness like those of a cat’ and displaying symptoms of insomnia. Soon, everyone in Macondo is sleepless. In keeping with Webb and Byrnand’s analysis, Márquez seems to suggest that consumerism is the root cause of Macondo’s insomnia pandemic. When the

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isolated town of Macondo becomes connected to a mail and trade route, it attracts strangers from other places and Macondo’s residents are inspired to participate in the new market environment. The head of the town, José Arcadio Buendía, pinpoints the cause of the outbreak to his wife’s candy animals. Márquez then describes the spread of the disease as follows:

In the meantime, through an oversight that José Arcadio Buendía never forgave himself for, the candy animals made in the house were still being sold in the town. Children and adults sucked with delight on the delicious little green roosters of insomnia, the exquisite pink fish of insomnia, and the tender yellow ponies of insomnia, so that dawn on Monday found the whole town awake. No one was alarmed at first. On the contrary, they were happy at not sleeping because there was so much to do in Macondo in those days that there was barely enough time (Márquez, p. 46).

In this quotation, Márquez draws together the fragility and sweetness of the animals with the nauseating image of a disease spreading throughout Macondo’s residents. Their enjoyment of the candy animals makes their ignorance of the insomnia sickness all the more disturbing.

As Márquez makes clear, the Macondo the residents’ desire to consume is not out of necessity but rather from a newly-discovered participation in the manufacture and trade of useless material objects. The incident can be read as a parody of the rise in products promoted as sleep aids; indeed, in light of the previously discussed
Wander Company study of 1934, the candy animals could be compared to Ovaltine, a sugary drink mix hailed as beneficial to sleep despite little scientific evidence.

‘Cheating’ Sleep: The Idea of Sleep as a Waste of Time in Popular Journalism

In presenting the misguided initial joy of Macondo’s sleepless population, Márquez seems to have predicted the renewed preoccupation with sleeping less to achieve more. Parallel to our preoccupation with sleep hygiene, there are also frequent articles that, paradoxically, suggest that sleep is a hindrance to productivity. Such an argument further complicates our relationship with the night; it is distressing to be unable to sleep, but because sleep can be viewed as a waste of precious time, it would be a blessing not to need to sleep in the first place. An article published in 2013 on the Business Insider website bears the title ‘18 Successful People Who Get By On Barely Any Sleep’. The sleeping patterns of powerful figures such as Margaret Thatcher are frequently discussed as a contributing factor to their achievements, and this article provides a list of CEOs and political leaders with similarly long working hours. As with the article in The Guardian, the use of language is peculiar. By sleeping less, the reader can be added to the list of those ‘excel[ling] at work’ and maintaining their social life. Despite the excessive number of articles on sleep hygiene, this article seems to suggest that resisting sleep is more beneficial than harmful. Readers are advised to ‘be cautious’ about sleeping, which in no way expresses the dangers – both to the ‘successful person’ and those around them – of sleep deprivation.

Another example of popular journalism promoting the idea of ‘wasting’ time by sleeping can be found the issue of New Scientist released on 28 May 2016. This


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issue focused on sleep and, in particular, how to alter and change sleeping patterns to achieve the most efficient night’s rest possible. It is a strange, contradictory feature; some articles promote sleep hygiene, yet others encourage the act of tampering with, and cutting back on, a normal sleeping routine.

Set out like a Haines’ Manual, the main feature suggests that sleep is a mechanical process or a system that can be tweaked and adapted like a car engine. It separates the human being from the natural act of sleep by emphasising that humans are free to ‘use’ sleep as it suits them. Another piece in the issue that ironically echoes the citizens of Macondo bears the headline: ‘Can I cheat by sleeping in bits’.67 It invites the reader to ‘join the world of sleep hackers’ and interrupt a normal night’s sleep in order to be more productive. The end of the article issues a warning about the negative health effects of cheating sleep, explaining that ‘those extra hours might not be all they’re cracked up to be.’ But the warning appears redundant in a section that begins with an emphatic encouragement to try ‘microsleeps’ – and which even provides a handy diagram of all the different sleep cycles used by the so-called ‘sleep hackers’.

The New Scientist article promotes the idea of sleeping less to access more hours in the day, but in Someone Else Awake I intentionally show a significant drop in Erin’s productivity as her insomnia progresses. Not only is she too exhausted to spend her extra waking hours doing anything useful, but her insomnia also affects her ability to do her day job properly. Rather than romanticise sleeplessness for allowing Erin to be more productive, I present Erin’s lack of concentration, headaches and irritability to demonstrate the damaging nature of sleep deprivation.

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Alice Vernon
Chapter 7

Loneliness and Communication in *Someone Else Awake*

*Someone Else Awake* draws on theories of illness narratives in order to present convincingly Erin’s experience of insomnia. Sleeplessness disrupts Erin’s daily life, creating distance between herself and those around her, and it forces her to occupy a solitary, liminal space in the night. In Chapter 1, for instance, Erin already identifies the changes in her behaviour as a result of disruption to her sleep; after a particularly disjointed conversation with Nicholas in the library, I note that she ‘did not usually get angry with him when their conversations become muddled, but today she found that her shoulders were stiff with tension’ (p. 14). Increasingly isolated from her colleagues and without close friends or family, she finds herself in desperate need of company at night, sparking the invention of Bridget in Chapter 3. Ironically, the more Erin is aware of her nocturnal isolation, the more her ability to connect with colleagues and her family disintegrates. This section of the commentary will discuss the ways in which Erin’s loneliness and communication with others is presented in the novel.

Arthur W. Frank, in his book, *The Wounded Storyteller*, demonstrates that the ‘illness story begins in wreckage’ and is ‘both interrupted and […] about interruption’ (Frank, p. 164). The novel opens with an episode of sleep paralysis, and immediately presents to the reader the sense of interruption of normality that Frank describes. The reader cannot be sure whether Erin’s experience is real: the scene is presented subjectively, the vividness of sleep paralysis suggesting reality. But real or not, the
reader becomes acutely aware that Erin’s sleep, and her usual mental state, have been brutally interrupted. Subsequently, I show the way in which Erin battles with her own inability to distinguish hallucination from reality: ‘She was dreaming; she had to be’ (p. 3). But when the sleep paralysis eases, Erin is still uncertain about what has happened, and she arms herself with ‘a sharp pair of nail scissors’ before returning to her bedroom (p. 4). This sense of being vulnerable, of needing to defend herself, is exacerbated with each encounter with the old man in the library – the man who recalls the unknown figure at the camp. Not only is Erin’s sleep interrupted, but also her accepted relationships with those around her – her insomnia prompts paranoia and an inability to trust, and to communicate with, other people.

Prior to her first conversation with Bridget, I demonstrate Erin’s sense of growing panic, both through her inability to communicate coherently, and through her erratic attempts to change her sleeping habits. When Erin visits the local surgery in Chapter 3, for example, she finds it difficult to arrange an appointment with the receptionist: ‘She opened her mouth, but did not say anything. The receptionist ignored her and looked at the screen’ (p. 42). And when the doctor emerges from her office and calls Erin’s name, Erin becomes suddenly anxious and quickly leaves the surgery. There is a sense that Erin tries to follow the patterns of behaviour associated with illness – a visit to a doctor, a change in lifestyle and habits – but because she is not sick, such patterns do not provide the consolation she expects, and in fact serve only to emphasise the disorder caused by insomnia.

Michel Foucault, in his 1963 book, The Birth of the Clinic, explains that ‘the more complex the social space in which [disease] is situated becomes, the more
denatured it becomes. In other words, illness becomes complicated and strange in response to social and medical intervention. Erin’s insomnia is deeply influenced by the social space. Indeed, it is because of her social experiences that the narrative gains momentum. Initially, Erin’s sleeplessness begins as a result of her fear of the man in the library. Then, it worsens because she worries about not being able to sleep before her alarm rings, and she becomes preoccupied with managing her behaviour and routine every night. Through the frequent use of flashbacks, Erin’s sleepless condition becomes associated with social interactions from the past, and made stranger for it.

Rather than seek professional help or confide in others, Erin retreats into herself. In Understanding Sleeplessness, Neubauer describes the process of ‘internalization’ which is commonly seen in sufferers of insomnia (Neubauer, p. 90). It is this aspect of sleeplessness that informs the novel; the narrative clearly focuses on Erin’s pathological withdrawal into her own imagination, which functions in two ways: it forces her to confront images of her childhood trauma, and it also provides some form of relief from sleeplessness. In other words, the internalisation produced by her sleeplessness fuels the flashbacks and hallucinations that run throughout the novel, but also allows her to regain some control through her conversations with Bridget.

Whilst writing the novel, I frequently returned to the BBC Radio 4 programme, Don’t Log Off, presented by Alan Dein. Working through the night, Dein invites strangers from across the world to talk to him. I was fascinated by the ease with which the callers shared their personal thoughts and experiences with him. For example, in the episode aired on the 3rd January 2017, Dein connects at midnight with

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a Hungarian woman living in the United Kingdom. Music from Mozart’s opera, The Magic Flute, plays in her living room while she tells Dein of the therapeutic qualities of music and singing for her chronic fatigue syndrome – an illness that cut short her PhD studies. It was this sense of immediate familiarity in the conversations of Don’t Log Off that I sought to emulate in the novel. From the very first ‘phone call’ between Erin and Bridget, their conversations appear seamless. There is no awkwardness or reticence; like Dein and his late-night partners, there is an instant tone of comfort to their communication. For instance, when Erin tries to find a way to describe her sleeplessness, Bridget finishes the thought with her own experience: “As though you’re the only person awake for miles?” There was a rustling sound, as though Bridget was settling down.’ (p. 50). These conversations show a mutual understanding of each other. But while it is initially presented as though sleeplessness is the gateway to this deep, immediate connection, Erin’s increasing distress begins to complicate the dialogue, and subsequently the very nature of Bridget.

The conversations with Bridget reflect Erin’s need to communicate not just at night, but with the people already in her life. Beyond her night-time experiences, I frequently demonstrate Erin’s awkwardness and misunderstanding with other people. For example, there is the confusing exchange with Nicholas at the start of the novel, but, more pointedly, her telephone conversations with her mother stand in deliberate contrast to the way Bridget speaks to her. In Chapter 8, for instance, Erin tells Bridget that she still cannot sleep even though she has just remembered the walk through the trees – a memory that she thinks is the cause of her sleeplessness:

‘I can’t sleep,’ Erin said.

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69 Alan Dein, Don’t Log Off, BBC Radio 4, 3 January 2017.
‘Well, I wouldn’t have expected things to go back to normal straight away. It might take a little time before you can sleep normally again.’

Erin rolled onto her back and covered her eyes with her arm. ‘I think you’re right, you know. I’m not sure I’ve solved it.’

‘It just doesn’t feel like a satisfying reason. Wait, I don’t think “satisfying” is the right word…’

‘No,’ Erin said. ‘I know what you mean. It doesn’t really make sense. I was scared of the woods, but…’ (p. 131).

Further in the chapter, however, Erin receives a phone call from her mother. Where I present an ease of understanding between Erin and Bridget, there is now a sense of jarring miscommunication. Erin’s mother is telling her about the situation with Rhys, and about the boy who broke his arm while under Rhys’s care. Her mother blames it on the child, and says, “‘That girl you were friendly with – Sarah – she was a bit like that, wasn’t she?” to which Erin replies, “‘Not at all” (p. 138). Their tone is confrontational and defensive – they constantly disagree with each other. This stark contrast between Bridget and Erin’s Mum is established early in the novel, but it is further developed here to show that Bridget is not only a way for Erin to feel less lonely in her sleeplessness, but also as a fantasy of an idealised mother-figure. Moreover, where Bridget is first assumed to be real, she becomes less tangible as Erin’s childhood trauma and complex relationship with her mother is revealed.

In order to present the imaginary nature of the conversations between Erin and Bridget, I deliberately include moments where their dialogue overlaps or is unrealistically focused on Erin. With increasing frequency as the novel progresses, I suggest that Bridget is not real through her ability to finish Erin’s sentences or
through her unlikely pre-knowledge of Erin’s family and past life. Moreover, in
Chapter 5, Erin is so desperate to communicate, that she foregoes her routine of
looking for Bridget’s light across the road. Even though it is unusually early for them
to be talking, Bridget answers Erin’s call and tells her, “Well, I saw your living room
go dark, so I thought I’d come upstairs. Just in case” (p. 76). In addition to the
idealistic ease with which Bridget and Erin talk, I present Erin in this scene as quite
child-like: she creates a convenient way to break the ‘rules’ of her friendship with
Bridget while still maintaining the fantasy.

Perhaps the most obvious clue to the reality of the women’s relationship is the
way in which I never show Bridget talking to Erin. Her voice is disembodied; Erin has
set up the fantasy so that she does not need to see the woman across the road in order
to create the sense of company that she desires.

Tove Jansson’s 1982 novel, The True Deceiver, includes an interesting
exchange of dialogue between two women. Katri, a young, friendless woman begins
to manipulate an elderly and wealthy children’s author, Anna, into thinking that her
age makes her vulnerable. After staging a fake burglary, Katri successfully persuades
Anna to let her and her brother move into Anna’s large house. But Jansson
increasingly shifts the tone of their relationship, and the reader begins to wonder if it
is Anna, not Katri, who holds the power. A conversation towards the end of the book
shows the way in which their relationship, despite its tone of animosity, has an almost
symbiotic nature. Jansson writes:

‘So you can’t sleep, either,’ Anna said.

‘No. It takes time to get used to these bright nights.’
‘I used to like it,’ Anna said. ‘I used to like a lot of things.’ Her voice was cold.

‘When you were young.’

‘Not then,’ Anna said. ‘Not so long ago. For that matter, I don’t want anything to eat, and you can bring in the dog dish. He isn’t coming back. He wants to get away from you.’ Anna turned off the light in the kitchen. In the parlour, the night brightness was strong in all the windows facing the sea.

Behind her, Katri said, ‘Anna? Wait a moment – don’t go yet. Couldn’t you please tell me what it is that’s happened to you?’ When Anna didn’t answer, Katri went on. ‘Don’t you know what I’m talking about?’

‘Oh yes, I know,’ Anna replied, and her voice was altered; it was a voice of compassion.70

Katri, who is introduced in the novel as a silent, hostile character, is shown here to have been noticeably changed by her interactions with Anna. She easily engages in small-talk, and even urges Anna to stay with her. Jansson presents an overlap of their speech, such as when Katri tries to finish Anna’s sentence by adding, “‘When you were young.’” Moreover, there is a sense that the two women are communicating beyond what is revealed to the reader through their dialogue.

In John Ajvide Lindqvist’s novel, Let the Right One In (2004), neighbours Oskar and Eli use Morse code on the wall joining their respective apartments. Lindqvist writes: ‘Yesterday Oskar had tried knocking on the wall before he went out

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and Eli had answered. Then they went out at the same time. Because Oskar and Eli are children, this unconventional method of communication becomes imbued with a sense of secrecy and excitement. Similarly, in Someone Else Awake, where Erin demonstrates a child-like attachment to Bridget, any sign of life across the street becomes a way for Erin to feel as though she is connecting with Bridget when neither of them are asleep.

Throughout Someone Else Awake, electric lights and curtains become a tool for communication. The conversations Erin has with Bridget develop from the comfort Erin takes in seeing someone else’s bedroom light, in Chapter 1: ‘She felt almost excited. It did not necessarily mean they were in the same situation as she was, though. It was probably just coincidence’ (p. 21). She interprets the light as evidence of a source of company. It makes her feel less alone in her sleeplessness to know that someone else is awake at night. Subsequently, Erin becomes almost captivated by the light; in Chapter 2 I write that the sight of it felt like ‘returning to familiar surroundings on the way back from a long trip’ (p. 30). It is her fascination with the light which, in turn, leads to her increasing preoccupation with the life of the woman across the road, and her intense speculation about it. She leaves her own light on so that the woman ‘would know she was awake with her’ (p. 31).

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Chapter 8

Conclusion

While writing Someone Else Awake, I observed a steady publication of new articles, programmes and books about sleep online, on television, in newspapers, and on the non-fiction shelves. There did not, however, seem to be a synchronicity of opinion between them. Some articles would recommend micro-managing sleep, others would encourage daytime napping, and there were many variations of the suggested length of time ideally spent asleep each night. In recent years, sleep has become a contested site. These discussions, no matter how contradictory, are important, however, because they show a renewed need to understand and prioritise sleep.

In 2017, Matthew Walker published Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams. It has been widely read; in February 2018, it was in twelfth place on the W H Smith Non-Fiction Book Chart. Walker writes in an accessible tone, using this familiarity to allow readers to understand the research from his twenty-year career as a sleep scientist. He writes directly and for effect: ‘There are many ways in which a

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72 WHSmith Non Fiction Book Chart, <https://www.whsmith.co.uk/chart/books/non-fiction-02x09005> [accessed 16 February 2018].
lack of sufficient sleep will kill you.’ Throughout the book, he celebrates the restorative power of sleeping eight hours every night, and repeatedly informs the reader of the ways in which regularly missing an hour or two of sleep can lead to an early death. In the ongoing conversation about sleep, Walker’s book offers definitive, often frightening, evidence that will perhaps dissuade further arguments on how much sleep we need. Nevertheless, some of his anecdotes and data are written with such intent to shock the reader that he inadvertently fuels the ‘performance anxiety’ that easily disrupts the onset of sleep (Neubauer, p. 109).

From its focus on feelings of bodily vulnerability to more recent worries about the long-term health risks, my research has shown that sleep provokes anxiety. In literature, this unease manifests through death, the undead, madness and supernatural possession. The canon of literature exploring sleep forms the foundations of Erin’s experience: over the course of my novel, Erin has strange hallucinations, an excessive focus on sleep, and the fear of strangers lurking in the darkness. Erin’s sleeplessness and resulting anxieties stem from her childhood, but I demonstrate how the contemporary exploration into ‘perfect’ sleep provokes her distress. By showing the effects of repeated exposure to popular medical journalism, I present Erin’s concern that she is doing something wrong. *Someone Else Awake* becomes imbued with what Neubauer calls a culturally-influenced ‘standard’ of sleep (Neubauer, p. 42). My novel draws attention to the debilitating effects these articles have on Erin’s condition, inviting readers to consider whether their own perception of sleep is similarly influenced by the current preoccupation.

As previously discussed, the issue of romanticising illness in fiction is something that I have considered throughout writing the novel. Blake Butler’s

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Nothing seems to suggest that insomnia allows him to break formatting conventions, thus presenting him as more creative and unique in his writing. I sought to avoid implying that Erin’s sleeplessness allowed her to be more productive. Further to this, I chose to use a third-person narrator in order to maintain coherence, limiting Erin’s breakdown in language to her conversations with Bridget. Ultimately, Bridget is a creation – a part of Erin’s imagination – but she is formed out of confusion and loneliness, a kind of coping mechanism, rather than a product of insomniac creative expression. Indeed, Erin’s imagination, and particularly her ability to distinguish real from hallucinatory, becomes more unmanageable as her sleeplessness progresses. I deliberately present her flashbacks, visions, and perceptual disturbances as frightening and unpleasant. She becomes disorientated and clumsy; there is no benefit, creative or otherwise, to her sleeplessness.

In *Why We Sleep*, Walker dispels the myth that we can be more productive by sleeping less. This is something that major corporations are finally beginning to understand. As Walker describes, the insurance company Aetna provides its employees with ‘bonuses for getting more sleep, based on verified sleep-tracker data’ (Walker, p. 333). Furthermore, businesses are beginning to install ‘nap pods’ and lights that emulate natural sunlight levels so as not to disrupt workers’ circadian rhythms. Such a shift in understanding of sleep stands in stark contrast to texts I have examined in this commentary, such as Butler’s memoir and Jonathan Coe’s insomniac film expert in *The House of Sleep*; recent discussion is focusing on the creativity and increased productivity of long, natural, regular sleep rather than romanticising the individual who boasts of spending just three or four hours in bed.

*Someone Else Awake* reflects modern sleep. While I acknowledge that the novel is a creative interpretation of illness, I have strived to give an account that is
realistic and objective in its narrative, rather than one which romanticises sleeplessness or the insomniac. As Richard Gwyn notes, the ‘role of the storyteller’ in illness narratives ‘is that of witness.’

Recent neuroscientific developments have allowed us to better understand the benefits of eight hours sleep, yet our individual ability to achieve that quality of sleep is still easily affected by environmental and psychological conditions. Erin struggles to follow a conventional routine of recovery, instead finding comfort in a child-like imaginary friend to help her cope with her situation. By bearing ‘witness’ to Erin’s sleeplessness, I hope my novel resonates with readers who find themselves awake at night.


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