

LITTLE BEAST

Before she can even begin to know what's happening, Amy is swallowed. Before lungs can scream, before legs can kick, before instinct has even seen its name on the team sheet, the beast has her in its fists and in its eyes, and the car is lurching out of control, grinding against the side of the tunnel in a shower of golden sparks and shattered green tiles, and she is being torn from her seat, white fingers slipping numbly from the steering wheel, seatbelt ripped out at the socket. The creature twists and pulls her by the shoulders towards its gaping pothole of a mouth, unhinging in slow-motion at the jaw, toothless, wide and wet. Its bulk fills the car like the airbag that doesn't come fitted as standard, making ribbons of the seat-backs, and it is growing still, the muscles under its taut leathery skin tearing and rebuilding to keep pace with its rapidly swelling frame, and when she catches a glimpse of herself mirrored in its glassy black eyes she is overcome with the sense that she herself is getting smaller, smaller and smaller, withering and shrinking to match her own tiny rag-doll reflection in those glassy black eyes. She feels nothing, thinks nothing, and the kick of her sandal against the leather-effect dashboard is not a fight back, it's a bump in the road.

The car bursts the mouth of the tunnel, clearing the steady white buzz of static on the radio, so that the last thing Amy hears as she is gulped painlessly down in one, two, three jerks of the beast's fat skull is a chorus of the Beatles' 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand'.

Fatally unbalanced by its now lone passenger's rapidly doubling weight, the car – now little more than a hurtling box of metal and monster, like some hellish sardine tin - swerves across the tarmac and spills into the ragged dirt trench that runs the side of the road, hammering into the earth with a dull crunch thud.

A crackle of bird flight fades away into the dry night air above the forest, leaving behind only the thin-lipped hiss of the breeze through the tops of the trees, which themselves stand clenched like teeth and rheumy white; deadwood spectators, biting the roadside with morbid glee. A single headlight, shattered, twisted hopelessly off-angle, burns full-beam into their stark ranks and then -

With a squeal that might be metal or might be its voice, the beast peels itself out of the crumpled remains of the car and stumbles thick-kneed and heavy-bellied into the blossoming darkness of the night-time forest.

The creature fixes a path north, following the directions written in the secret semaphore of tree branches to furrow deeper, darker, between birch and thicket; somewhere to be, someone to see. Ever on it pushes, onwards and inwards, through thorns and

splintered fingers, backed by the distant applause of rustling leaves. Waves of acid boil and churn at the creature's stretch-thin belly, pounding and chewing on its insides until its throat burns and its muscles cramp and finally, in a hoarse, drawn heave, the beast crashes to a stop, to go no further.

It finds itself a hollow in the base of a huge old Yew tree, a space just big enough to fit its bulk inside, and there the beast curls up, knees and chin, and lets its eyes

weigh slowly
shut.

A memory comes now, before sleep, between the weight of long hot breaths and the beating pulse in its belly; images of a place the beast does not recognize, from a time it should not remember.

It is a memory the beast cannot possibly have, but somehow it does:

THE WAY WE WERE

This is what? November eighty-nine. Me and Jack are stood out on the seafront for a while before dinner. We're leaning against the railings, wrapped in each other's coats, watching wave after whipped, grey wave rake at the pebbles below. We're the only ones out in this weather, suffering the spit and the salt. The radio this morning said there'll be rain later in the evening, and heavy north-easterlies for at least another two days. Not exactly postcard weather, but here we are.

We watch the waves a while, the tide squeezing higher under the weight of the sinking sky. We stand here maybe ten minutes, watching, nestled in each other's coats, before the cold gets too much. I lift my head off Jack's lapel and tell him we should find somewhere to eat now, and we slip from the railings and drift arm-in-arm back along the empty front. Slowly we go, between the barren concrete planters and commemorative iron benches; Me looking mostly out to sea but occasionally up at Jack; Jack scanning the buildings across the road for a good place to eat. We let the gulls overhead do all the talking.

It's off-season so, except for the occasional upstairs window with the lights still on, the parade's more or less one long wall of metal shutters. Couples like

us, the winter weekenders, there's no point opening your gift shops for us. We won't want to play the arcades or buy souvenir tea towels. We don't come here for that. No, it's long morning lie-ins in paper-doily B&Bs for us. The Full English with extra bacon and the just-so eggs with the big fat yolks. Cliff-edge nature trails and old Roman ruins. We come to places like this to not be at home, to slip from the currents our normal daily lives. No TV, no shops, no dinner-with-friends; we want the isolation; the Us. Huddled together under pearl-grey sky and hair-whip winds to prove that just being with each other is enough. Sod your Parisian sunsets and chocolate covered cherries, we'd tell you if you asked, this is romance.

What you can sell us, though, is food. Us couples that come for the off-season breaks, the newly-mets and the relationship-rescuers (we were the first kind back then, Me and Jack, or not far off at least), we can always be relied upon to eat too much. Open your restaurants, pitch us your stalls. We'll take whatever you've got. The fresh prawns patted with butter that you get in a paper cup and eat with a wooden fork, walking along the pier. The big fat chips cooked in beef fat and drizzled with Sarson's. Yeah, it's three degrees outside, not counting wind chill, but we might still fancy an ice cream cone – just the one to share, fifty-fifty on the chocolate flake.

But we've landed in a small town this trip, and the pickings would be pretty slim here even if it were

summer. So our dining choice for tonight is between the place with the big green fish over the door and the faded photos of brown somethings-with-chips in the window. The one with the chalkboard laying flat on the pavement outside, knocked over once too often in the wind. The board says they also do pizza. I could go for pizza. Jack could go for pizza. The shutters are up and the door says Open, but there are no lights on inside. And the moulded plastic seating through the glass doesn't look too romantic, either. Hardly the kind of place I'd pictured telling him...

Well anyway, it's that or, further down, the All-You-Can-Eat-Buffer Night at the Happy Garden Chinese Restaurant. They're probably trying to drum up some winter trade from the locals, so the buffet's a pretty decent price. Doesn't seem to be working though – it still looks dead inside. People only want delivery in this kind of weather, I suppose. Unlike the fish place, though, the Happy Garden looks nice enough inside - cosy, golds and reds, and proper wooden tables. Candles even.

It's an easy enough decision.

There's no one around when we walk in, neither staff nor clientele, and after standing by the door a while we decide to seat ourselves. Redundant as it seems, I lead us over to one of the booths near the back of the restaurant for a bit more privacy.

I must have spent a lot of time looking down at the table that night, because I really remember a lot of little things. I can see it all quite clearly, probably more

so than anything else. The table has a little porcelain bowl set into the wood, filled with water and two floating candles that smell faintly of Orange Blossom. There's a knot of three plastic Chinese Roses at the base of the metal stand that holds the wine list, two red flowers and one white. I'm nervous, so I pinch off a stem leaf from one of the red roses and twirl it between my finger and thumb, while Jack studies the faux-leather menu as if there were even the remotest possibility that he might choose anything other than the All-You-Can-Eat-Buffer option. It's amazing we didn't have coronaries, the amount of food and booze we used to get through in those days.

The music in the background is something small, tinkling, non-descript. There are paper fans mounted on the walls, which are painted porkchop red on raw, soft-looking plaster.

A waitress appears, arriving in a hiss of beaded curtains from an entrance hidden somewhere under an alcove at the back of the house. Delicate-looking stick, pale and papery. She floats her way over to our booth to take a drinks order, addressing the air between us without eye contact. She looks removed, like the ghost of a teenage summer waitress, damned to haunt the tables and booths of this lonely mirage restaurant, acting out an eternal loop of,

"Drink? Pint or half? Would you like ice and lemon?"

Just ice, thanks, I tell her, and she makes a few sharp scratches on her notepad and nods - to neither of us in particular - before floating back the way she

came, slowly retracing her writing with her nearly-empty biro as she goes.

Jack frowns at this newly non-alcoholic girlfriend in front of him.

“I was gonna say. Just lemonade tonight?”

I look down at the plastic leaf in my hand start absent-mindedly cutting little ant-bites out of it with my last good fingernail.

“Yeah, well... There is something I wanted to tell you actually. I –”

But Jack interrupts me, sniffing the air, saying,

“Can you smell burning?”

I’m not really - “A bit. You know, we haven’t been as careful as we could have these last few weeks...”

“No... No, I think it’s coming from the kitchen...”

“I, um, I took a test this afternoon...”

I thought the word ‘test’ would do enough, but you know what he’s like when he gets something in his head, and takes a deep sniff of air that makes his eyelids flutter.

“Ugh ...Wow, that is awful. Can you smell that?”

There is something acrid maybe, but –

“Yes, I can. Jack, listen...”

He snorts, “Hmmp. No wonder this place is empty. You sure you want to eat here? That place with the big plastic fish over the door looked open, we could -”

“Jack, this is important. ”

“Sorry, it was just...” and he sniffs again, more gently, wiping his nose with his knuckle. “Are you okay?”

I press ahead, pushing the words out.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I am. I suppose. But I’m trying to tell you that...” Deep breath, Amy. I open my mouth to say it, hoping the words will somehow just find their own way out in some semblance of the things I’ve been rehearsing all afternoon, but right at that moment, just when I’m on the verge of saying it, something on the table between us catches my eye, and instead I’m saying -

“Oh God, your menu’s on fire!”

Jack blinks and frowns. “What?” Looks down. He hasn’t noticed - he’s been holding the menu over the candle flame while we’ve been talking. “Oh bollocks!”

And he jerks in his seat and flips the menu over, blowing wet puffs of air and spit at the smouldering plastic. I’m trying not to laugh; I’ve got hand a over my mouth to stop, but this just makes me snort through my fingers and Jack wails at me, “Don’t laugh!” then whispers, far too seriously, “It’s going all bumpy!”

This just makes me worse. He presses down on the burn mark with his fingers, trying to flatten down the warp, and I try and warn him too late,

“Well don’t - “

“Ow! fff-!”

“Well it’s molten plastic, it’s bound to-“

Jack swears and then giggles, saying, “Jesus! Look - it’s melted my bloody fingerprints off. Look!”

And he holds his fingers up for show. Lost all the feeling in them, he says. See, he says poking over the table at my shoulders, ribs, boobs. See.

Isqueal and slap his hands away. Stop it, someone’s

coming.

Our minimum-wage ghost arrives at back at the table with our drinks held high on a green plastic tray. Senseless to anything going on in our world, she continues her eternally scripted loop: Sets down one bottle of Guinness, one empty half-pint glass, one lemonade (ice and lemon, I notice). Tucks tray under arm. Cocks hip and readies biro. Delivers her line,

“Are you ready to order?”

Jack carefully slips his burnt menu underneath mine so you can't see where it's buckled, and casually hands them both back to the waitress. I have to look away, look down at the half-shredded leaf still pinched in my fingers, look anywhere just to keep a straight face.

He deadpans admirably,

“We'll both have the... buffet, thanks.”

The waitress smiles weakly, breathing a thank you into the empty air between us as she tucks the two menus under her arm and cuts an empty course back through the empty tables towards the, feels like, empty kitchen.

Here amongst the living, I make a smile at Jack from behind my hand. There's more to it than simple amusement.

“What?” he says, grinning back at me like a naughty schoolboy. He fishes the shrivelled lemon slice I didn't order out of my drink, sucks out the flesh and tosses it into the not-so-clean ashtray.

I say,

“Trust you.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” he says, still grinning.

And then I let go of the last piece of plastic leaf that’s stuck between my fingers and reach across the table to touch Jack’s arm. I can feel my own pulse in my thumb, beating gently against his skin.

And Jack says, “You okay?” his grin fading ever so slightly, and I nod and smile back.

Yeah, I say, and take a steady breath. I look up, look him square in the eye, over the water bowl set with flickering candles that smell faintly of Orange Blossom, over the little bits of shredded plastic leaf on my placemat, over the shrivelled slice of lemon curled foetally in the not-so-clean ashtray between us. I look at Jack and say, half-whisper -

I think I’m pregnant.

I can’t remember so much after that. Conversation got a little patchy. Dinner was short. He was kind of happy though, I think. He seemed it more than me, at least. I think I was kind of hoping he’d be horrified. That might have been more comforting in a way. I remember when we got back to the B&B, I remember lying there in bed, wide awake for what seemed like hours, long after Jack fell asleep. He was rolled right up close behind me, with one arm draped over my shoulder, mouth-breathing into my hair. I was staring at the walls, each in turn, just thinking, working things through – how I’d have to leave my course at college, where we’d live, what kind of job I’d be able to get and when. I remember then, for the

first time, thinking of being pregnant as more than having been diagnosed with something. That there was (and forgive me for sounding cliché here, but there are, trust me, certain times in your life when originality goes out the window, (and proves all the more comforting for its absence at that)) an actual life taking shape inside me.

It was real. There we were. Us. The bigger Us. Laying there three in a bed, like Russian dolls, one inside another: you in my belly, me in your father's arms. That was the first time I ever thought of you as a You, Edgar. You didn't have a name yet, obviously, but I knew you'd come out of me and you'd be real, and alive. You'd want things, and need things. You'd be a person. And so you are. You're thirteen years old now, Edgar. So I think it's about fucking time you realised the same thing was true about me.