

## **The Gardener is Gone**

The gardener is gone. This was the kind of banal statement Nina had recently taken to texting Will, her thumbs fumbling over the screen as she sat down with a herbal tea. She welcomed the silence again, the thought of having an employee always made her feel guilty, something she assuaged by diligently doing conversation with the gardener, a local legend known as John Stix, who had just told her he was off to buck hay. The phone in one hand, the tea in the other, she was googling the phrase ‘buck hay’ when a jittery noise broke the morning silence.

It was an unusual sound in the context of an empty house – as if someone had nimbly flicked the pages of a book. Nina glanced around the large room but no obvious source for it could she see. It was only some time later when the intermittent jitters and flickers had become just too irritating that she got up to play detective.

Both Will and Nina would admit over a bottle of wine that the house was too big. They were slightly embarrassed by this, and the first to volunteer it when friends from London came down, as if saying it stopped other people from thinking it. Once they had made the decision to move down to Somerset (lockdown had drawn many of their friends to similar conclusions), they realised with genuine shock how much selling a two-bedroom house in Islington afforded them here. Will had laughed and told her to embrace feudalism, but Nina had tried changing the house’s name. She didn’t want to live in the old Manor House, certainly if that ascended Will to the status of local lord, making Nina his lady. It was the petition objecting to the new name *Nyumba*, a Swahili word she had learned on her travels, that first told her they were at odds with the village; but the postman not delivering to them had been the direct action that prompted the reversal. Oddly the out of town courier

companies hadn't minded the change one bit. But the locals had seemed to move at once with an impressive fortitude: John Stix was still laughingly referring to *Nyumba* that morning.

Nina in socks made her way up the L shaped stairs, her head craned up, her arm on the balustrade. The flickering noise was high above her; she could hear it again. At the window was a butterfly. It was still, its wings pulled in like a book on a shelf. And then there was a spasm of flickering. Dusky orange and brown wings, perhaps white spots – it was hard to see properly because the window was so high, and because the wings seemed perforated. The butterfly was damaged.

She wasn't exactly an animal lover; she just didn't like to see anything hurt. Nina had an "excess of empathy" - her father repeated this conclusion every Christmas. Of course they had cats, but who didn't? But this compassion was passive, its only dynamic function was to drive Nina to furious guilt – over the turkey at Christmas, over the roadkill they picked their way through on the way to Waitrose. And now again was that same blind affinity. The window did not open and it was too high to reach. This butterfly was trapped.

Those brown and orange wings, like stain-glass adorning the window. She was no expert, but she hadn't seen them before. Back downstairs she returned to google: the Heath Fritillary - *Melitaea athalia*, it stated definitively – a priority species in the UK, threatened, and only still in existence through conservation efforts. A pang shot through Nina again. It was a discomfiting mixture of distress at the thought of plight, and a tension that events could not be averted. This specimen of Heath Fritillary was alive, but doomed. It was the plot of an anxiety dream.

She was awoken from it by a text from Will, the words came superimposed on the image of the butterfly on her phone.

*LOL – bit ironic there – getting the gardener in when you're on gardening leave!*

This was true. Three months earlier Nina had given up being a success and left the BBC. Producer had been on her CV for ten years and on her list of ambitions since she'd been at Bristol University ten years before that. And she had her niche – travel programming. Will was more frustrated than her that she had been passed over for deputy head of BBC Travel & World, and given the amount of time there was for soul-searching recently, she wondered if the absence of disappointment actually signalled a lack of desire. But thwarted ambition wasn't why she'd left.

Her early days at the Beeb had coincided with boom-time in tourist television. An old 1970s comedian had cornered the market in novel ways of getting from A to B, the selling point being his twinkly personality, which he brought to every continent. And Nina had a great time accompanying him on the crew, ultimately making producer, which meant she was tasked with conceptualizing more ways of getting the comedian around the world, so that his face could appear regularly every Sunday – one of those comforting sights the family could gather around, before it was back to school and work on Monday.

*Trevor Belmont's Tales of One Hundred and One Flights*, one of the later instalments, had won a BAFTA. It was Nina's baby. It had come at a time when Will had been applying pressure on Nina to have an actual baby – he was unhappy he was being asked to wait until she was ready. In turn, she knew she had a tendency to wait, passively, for ready to arrive.

Later that day, when she watered the indoor plants, the butterfly was still there. This was no surprise as nothing might have changed its circumstances. *How did you get in?* With the gardener on that big ride-on lawnmower she'd had the French doors closed all morning. But before they shut Nina did smell the gasoline, the cats darting for cover at the sound of the engine, the murmur of the birds in the Sycamore tree. Was this when the butterfly got into the house?

An image had been burned in her mind of a walk they'd been on when they first moved to Somerset. It was corn harvest time, October – they'd been wearing coats. Rounding a bend in the footpath Nina had seen that a corn field that had been a two metre jungle the week before was being harvested. Will said that the recent hot summers meant it was possible to produce corn domestically, and they'd pulled the tassels off a cob, ripe and ready to eat.

But now the whole field was receiving a savage haircut. It was quite satisfying to watch the combine harvester patterning the land with a roar, in long rows it cut; drawing closer they saw that only a square remained, like an island of jungle in a sea of brown. And from this island, as the harvester bore down, sprang pheasants and rabbits, the former in their loud panic, the latter, at least ten of them, backs flat, eyes popping, scuttling for their lives.

As they ran a line from Sylvia Plath popped into Nina's head, the Rabbit Catcher, -

*Sliding shut on some quick thing,  
The constriction killing me also.*

A week later the Heath Fritillary was still there. Will was back and cynical – *surely it's dead Nina, it hasn't moved for two days* - but a practical help, ordering a butterfly net on Amazon and strapping it to a broom handle for her. But it still fluttered when poked with the rim of the net, avoiding climbing into its only chance of rescue. The animal just didn't know what was good for it.

She'd made the decision to leave the BBC travelling home, book folded flat on her lap, her cheek trapped against the window of the plane, allowing herself a secret cry. That same book she was still reading on Thursday, when the jittery noise broke the silence once more. Nina screamed in frustration. It wouldn't die! Will laughed and turned back to his phone – John Stix wants to know what day you want him next week.

- I'm not sure we need him, Will.

She gathered the butterfly broom once more. It was release, or she'd use it as a tool of euthanasia, of that Nina was sure. In a breathless moment it was in the net, she carried it

down the stairs and through the house like fissile material. Doors open, it sucked at air and floated up to a tall leaf where it sat for several hours. You know it's the rarest butterfly in England, she said to Will. For the rest of the afternoon they saw it pirouette around the garden.

The next day they found a *Shrill carder* bee in the bathroom.

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### **The Road Ahead**

It was a pleasure to turn. I don't recall ever feeling neutral about turning onto that road. On the map it's the A30-something, but to me it might as well have been called *The Mists of Avalon*: a five-miler, stretching from Port Milne to Lanterne, that swung up to the top of Lettlesdon Hill, before taking the driver through a couple of pretty villages. But it was the section of tarmac, once you'd passed through Evesham, foot right down to make it up the steep incline, humanity left behind; we passed through tree-lined uplands, hills that seemed to fall off the road like waves off an old pier. The petrified remnants of an old power station were the only discernible sign of humanity's concrete presence – a stark building coated in *Keep Out* notices and guard-dog signs.

Maybe the road's feints and teases mirrored the personal ambiguity I had lived with my whole life, but had lately felt so worn out by. I read an obituary once that stuck in my mind – a bon vivant academic who had dazzled in his chosen field but left, the article noted towards its conclusion, something unknowable, something just out of reach to even his

closest friends. In maudlin moments I reflected how I didn't even have the consolation of dazzle.

But I love this road because each time I drive it, at least when I am alone, I remake its sloping obscurities in *my* image – it becomes a childhood dream, a sketch on the back of an envelope, a story that unfolds like stories used to unfold before reality begun to be nailed down by our adult progresses in the world. I was more a success now than I would ever have believed in those days when, out of habit, I took out my uncertainty on people around me like a knife-throwing magician. Time had pretty much staled those infinite varieties and I was a lot easier to get along with, my self-absorption now perhaps only a habit I indulged for pleasure when alone.

On those occasional winter days when the mists rolled in across the road, I may have been in... well, I'm where I want to be. Like the scenes of heaven in old Hollywood technicolor musicals, you work your way through the clouds and a mystical light. Those days, rarer still, when snow strafes the fog and the night draws in, provide an examination of driving technique. I am under no illusions – this is still hopeless country on a bad day.

The following happened one bad day. It happened suddenly. *Did it happen suddenly?* For years I've been telling students of mine that nothing truly happens suddenly. Look, I'll just tell you it as I remember it; I won't try and finesse truth to make this more entertaining or more meaningful. I'll just tell you what happened.

I become aware of a car behind me – up my arse, in driving parlance. So, I glance at the rear view mirror. It's so close I can make out facial features: a woman's eyes. The mist has come in and we've both got our lights on, but her car itself is obscured – only her face lit up in my mirror, like a spotlight on a stage.

I blink. I'm tired. It's late. Her eyes seem red in the dazzle of my rear lights, an animal gleam. This is not correct. We cannot see *only* the eyes of our pursuer on a country

road at dusk. It simply defies the spatial dimensions of the situation I was in that day; there's just too much back seat and boot in the way; and then there's the peaks and troughs of my fishing equipment, three sets of wellies and rolled up socks (multiple). Then there's the bonnet of *her* car, of course – a large four-by-four, by the looks of it. I peek again. I can't make out *anything*. She's backed away now. Or did I have my foot on the accelerator? I look ahead. Through the fog I make out the sign for Randlesham, which means we must be going uphill. I should therefore be slowing down. I look in the mirror in front of me – the one that is specifically designed to enable observation of what is behind me; the mirror I too often use to locate smears of breakfast on my face before a class. She's gone. Nothing. She must have turned off.

There should be nothing unusual in this. It's a long road and often drivers don't want to get stuck for longer than they have to. I've tailgated before, the opportunities to overtake on a route as twisted as this don't come up very often, and when they do you want to be in a position to take them. But this is different. It doesn't feel right.

Those eyes – alight, slightly mocking. Or was I imagining it? Well, I can't check now. No, it was an ambiguous look, and as I now have nothing to do except drive, and revel in the charade of her eyes, I consider it a lot. Was that look she gave an admonishment? Did I do something wrong? But there weren't any lights to jump, nor any speed limit signs to obey, and besides I'm not in a rush today; I was just enjoying the vagaries of my thoughts amidst the turns of this road. I wasn't able to see the rest of her body – a language that might have given me a clue – like the *double teapot* (both hands rested on hips), or an arch of her jaw and a turn of her head, as if to say 'really?' No clue either in her voice, because I wasn't able to hear her above the sound of The Killers on Spotify, and also, if she did, in fact, have both her hands on her hips as she looked down her nose at me, how was she managing to drive the car? I mean, it's reckless... the fog, an undulating road at twilight, and this woman somehow

has the audacity to drive right up my rear with no hands on the steering wheel. And then she gives *me* a look.

At this time of night you sometimes see deer. There was one that walked right in front of me on one of the empty side roads. A large stag perhaps the height of the car. I followed for a mile, patiently waiting for it to locate a place to head off into the undergrowth. It was magical – like that scene in *Stand by Me* when Will Wheaton wakes up early and is the only one who sees the deer, solitary and silent. I remember thinking that this was my Will Wheaton moment, and that what the deer symbolized in the film must also be something symbolic to me then. After the deer had vanished I spent a good length of time thinking about what it all symbolized. I came up with nothing.

But if you met a deer on the Port Milne-to-Lanterne road it would be a bloody mess. This road is long and fast. I am now flooring it; the stretch by the power station. I look down: 70mph. The dial lights up. A warning? I'm going too fast? No, it's headlights... there's someone behind me.

But she's further back this time, and I have to really stare into the wing mirror. It's dark, and a gentle sleet has started to fall around both cars. I can still make out a woman's figure, haloed by the lights, though less clearly now; I'm really having to hunch over my steering wheel – which, given the treacherous driving conditions, is not a safe way to drive. But I continue to do so nevertheless, one eye on the dark tunnel of road ahead, the other trying to solve the mystery behind me.

And then the whole scene: ahead, behind, the damp grass verge on both flanks of both cars, becomes a blinding white. By instinct I shut my eyes to a squint – she's got the fog lights on! Furious, I bang on the horn for up to... well it feels like I'm sounding that horn into the emptiness of the English countryside for about a minute. It works. We return to the calm of the half-dark.



I remember my mother used to refuse to use the horn on the car when I was a kid. I never once heard it, even in situations in which I now know the Highway Code explicitly recommends its use. *Alert pedestrians or other road users to your presence if you may be a danger to them.* And even when a toot of the horn might move things along a bit, sometimes we'd sit behind a stationary vehicle whose engrossed driver, amiably chatting with someone on the pavement, simply didn't know we were there behind them, or that I was there at all.

Mum, why don't you just toot them?

There's no need.

But they don't know we're here.

Look, we can wait. We're not in a hurry.

What did she want to say but stop herself from saying? How did she fill those silences that took up the waiting while events acted upon her? Me sitting in the back, waiting with her.

The Killers have now finished their album but I don't replace them with anything. I use music like a comedian might use a nip of whisky before a show: it augments the experience. But, I want silence now: I've got to concentrate. The left turn to Leamington is coming up, and soon I'm coming off this blustery A-road and going home. This gives me a limited time to work out what makes me so uneasy about this woman following me. I slow down so she can get closer, come up really close.

There's a speck of something on my rear-view mirror. I clean it with the facemask half submerged in my jeans pocket, nearly losing control in the effort of arching my hand under the safety belt. But I can't see her properly because of this smudge that won't come off.

*Is this lipstick?*

No, it's dirt. No one cleans their car mirror, it just accrues dirt, grease and spit over the years. Maybe the garage has a go when they service the car, I don't know – I never *ask*

them to. I tend to say: *Just make all the lit warning icons on the dashboard go away.* Then as long as the vehicle takes me from A to B, I'm happy. I rub harder – it's strange, the texture of blood, difficult to remove.

The woman is smiling. We must have passed under one of the intermittent streetlights, because I'm aware of more now than just the animalistic glint of her eyes. There are lips, too, that seem to be forming plushly around her top teeth. Instinct says the snarl of a pursuing predator on a vulnerable open country road. No, perhaps it's more friendly, welcoming – one of those faces that keeps recurring in dreams in the star role of comforting enigma of the night. Certainly, I have tied myself to this woman: we two alone in the darkness of my favourite road. I could have pulled in, there were plenty of tributaries on this stretch. I could have waited alone in my lay-by and watched her stream off into the distance, but instead we maintain this holding formation. Or is it she who's unwilling to pull away? The road ahead is empty.

This journey has become exhausting. You know, there was a time when the peace of driving alone was enjoyable – a truce with the outside world. But with this attentive woman eating away at the road behind I can feel the ruining of it all. I'm not wearing my glasses, a thought I hoped would explain everything. Whereas once they were needed for reading, now for driving, soon they will be a permanent landmark on my face. I often found they cocooned experience, filtering everything into something like a plane's glide scope that only ever looked at things in straight lines, and this coincided, perhaps necessarily, with the middle of life, when doors had shut, choices diminished, the path ahead set.

I half expect the woman to have vanished in the endless time it takes to fumble for my glasses. But in fact she is still there, waiting for me, only now she is even more present – it's like she is *with* me. This woman, the dream. That intimacy when two people make the choice to be together, random elements that find each other like magnets. A confession: I never *felt*

it truly. I felt the sense of loyalty and pride – I felt *chosen*, but struggled to feel present. And I kicked and I screamed and I cried, and I blew the house down.

She speaks.

It's a voice kind, soft and welcoming. There is no danger, we are just travelling on this long road together.

*How have you been?*

Immediately, the clamour of the left turn to Leamington. It's signposted three times, a mile or so apart, as if its civic charms have to be drum-rolled into existence. Already there have been three warnings, and my eyes now search for the turn off. Her voice is so soothing and calm. She's no longer just a thought, an image romanticised into existence; she's now a memory of flesh and blood – to interact with and change, and who changes with me. *Where's the fucking turn-off?*

I didn't...

The car shudders through a gear shift. There's something I need to say to her. First, the standard placeholder apology and explanation – it's pure reflex. But then I submit to a wave of pure love. As I reach for the rear-view mirror, clutching its cheeks with both hands, the tears begin to fall, and now she too is crying, but beginning to smile; the kind of brave avenue of light a person summons when they're trying *so* hard to be good and kind in the face of the inevitable: we cannot continue.

It's alright, it doesn't matter.

I don't believe her. Of course it matters. The urge is to present my case, to plead the facts, to throw myself at her – and now it makes sense that the whole time I was being followed it felt like I was doing *wrong*, that I was running away from some kind of deserved reckoning. And so, with no thought for what was ahead, I look straight into her eyes.

I never knew what to say.

She looks back with kind eyes.

You didn't need to say anything.

She consoles me. And in that second I know that she is right – that there was a woman once who found me, and looked at me, and asked me questions and listened to the answers; who wanted to know me. And that is the very most a person can ever wish for in this life – this rear view mirror. A mirror that was then smashed. The next line is spat out from my gut, flecks of stomach lining freckling the mirror.

*You weren't listening.*

My voice is bitter, harsh, cruel. She's hurt; a look like a rabbit stares at headlights. The voice remains even, kind. She uses my name like it's the title of a novel. And then:

You *had* my attention.

And in the rage to explain to this woman that she wasn't listening – to make her *get it*, I'm very sorry to say this, I start to shout. And with this, perhaps inevitably, the cars begin to separate. It's far too fast, and it's dangerous, but I feel the exhilaration of foot-down driving on the straightest section of this twisted road. The mist has vectored in; it's impossible to see, and to my surprise she is still there, somewhere deep in the dark behind me.

But now *I'm* the wolf, my screams blowing the cars apart. It all comes out, winding down the window and howling into the cold night air. My voice catches, my throat hurts, face wet and red; the car revs, rebellious, yet still in the wind I hear:

I'm listening.

But that pathetic woman cannot catch me – she's not listening. She cannot understand ME.

I'm listening.

It's just an echo in a night that has long since stopped giving me what *I* want – a mysterious world to be made and made again in my own image, with no time for other people and their random obligations. No, this world is how I make it. Just try and stop me.

You know, *Deus ex machina* doesn't happen exactly like in the movies. When it hits me, there's no sudden jump-cut. I actually saw it – events did happen chronologically and coherently, if a fraction too quickly to react. My car hit something. This thing worked its way over the bonnet and smashed into the windscreen before rolling off the side of the car and then the back wheels must have gone over it. The glass is broken.

*I was listening.*

The car stops by necessity, this collision being its final straw; its machinery had, in all honesty, been complaining for some time at what it had been put through. The snow has become sleet when I open the door. I feel the cold in my T-shirt.

And there, crumpled but still complete, is the deer that I hit, peaceful already, the dark, empty road behind it. I turn to the sound of a roar and see the tail lights of the other car surge up the road ahead.

Falling to the ground, a mess of sweat and tears... I watch her disappear.

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