

The Worm

The doorbell finally rings at 9:35. Susan has been sitting in the armchair with a George Eliot novel and a cup of tea, pretending not to watch the clock. “Nine at the *latest*,” she had told him.

When she opens the front door, Darren slides through as soon as there is enough room, avoiding her gaze and heading straight for the stairs.

“Uh-uh!” she says, two abrupt syllables that freeze him on the first step – a prisoner caught in a searchlight.

She hesitates. She may have sounded too sharp.

“So ... how was it?”

“Fine,” he says, without turning round.

He leans away from her, itching to continue up the stairs, to snap the invisible elastic between them. She gazes through the treads of the floating staircase to the clock on the far wall. There was a time when she would have stood Darren in front of her and told him it wasn't good enough, that it wasn't to happen again.

It's not the time so much as the principle. He will push further if she lets him. 9:35 today, then 9:45. Soon it will be ten o'clock before he gets home. She should be pedantic. Nothing changes the fact that she has a duty to bring him up properly.

It would only take a single command to make him turn around, and she knows he would obey, but she's looking for him to turn around of his own accord, because he wants to.

“What did you watch?” she asks.

“*Ghostbusters* and *Dreamscape*.” The answers come without pause – rehearsed, perhaps?

“What were they about, then?”

He shrugs. “The usual sort of thing.”

“Were they good?”

He half-turns his head and says, “Yeah.” In profile, Darren’s nose is long, with a hint of a hook at the bridge. *Just like his*. Susan has to make herself start breathing again.

“And how is ... is Wayne?” she says.

“Okay.”

“And his parents?”

“All right.”

She doesn’t trust Wayne Chadwick or – for that matter – his mum and dad, who have an alarmingly hands-off approach to parenting. Does Darren even like Wayne? It’s less to do with friendship, she suspects, and more to do with the fact that Wayne is the only kid in the area with a TV and a VHS recorder in his own bedroom.

She has visions of Wayne persuading her son to watch *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, The Daily Mail’s current *bête noire*. Although she doesn’t want to get caught up in the current hysteria about video nasties, the paper’s claims of desensitisation have an undeniable power. She should talk to Wayne’s parents about it, but can’t face their certainty, their cheerful apathy.

Having given up on the idea of an actual conversation, she says, “Brush your teeth and get into your pyjamas. I’ll be up to tuck you in before ten.”

Does he understand her reference to the time, that she is letting him off, just this once?

His shoes thud on the exposed wooden steps, a marimba with only one tone, and he disappears at the top of the stairs. At some point, she must have stopped insisting that he take his shoes off at the front door. She has become obsessed with discipline lately, and how much of it – or how little – her son needs. It used to be easy. There used to be a check and balance, but things are different now. She only ever understood him with the help of an interpreter.

The loo flushes and she hears the patter of his feet, bare now, as he runs into his bedroom. She has spent the last few minutes frozen at the bottom of the stairs. Warily, she ascends. Just before turning the handle of his door, she remembers to knock. His insistence on privacy is another of her

recent concessions to him.

“Come in,” he says.

She pushes the door open. The light is already out. Darren is in bed, facing the wall, the tangle of his hair black in the gloom. He could do with a haircut.

She kneels at his bed and puts her arms round him. He shifts under the duvet.

“I love you, Darren,” she says.

“Love you, Mum.”

The way he says it reminds her of his Action Man figure: pull the string, hear the recorded voice. She rubs his flank through the duvet before going. She wants to leave the door ajar, but pulls it fully closed.

Back in the lounge she returns to her copy of *Middlemarch*. It will be at least three hours before she goes to bed. In the quiet of the lounge, curled up in the armchair with a long, difficult, absorbing book, she can pretend that both of them are sleeping soundly upstairs while she reads.

She puts the book back down. One more coffee. After all, it isn't the coffee that keeps her awake.

In the kitchen, she tosses granules into a mug and fills it with hot water. It's only once she unscrews the lid of the Coffee Mate that she remembers she used it all up earlier. Memory ambushes her. The jar hits the work surface and performs a brief, wild pirouette on its base before coming to a standstill.

She turns away from the counter. Four sheets of kitchen paper are spread out on the lino floor. At their centre is a lit candle, filched from the bathroom. Geoff's arm, outstretched, sprinkles Coffee Mate onto it from a height of three feet. Darren watches in delight as the powder combusts, causing the candle's flame to leap.

“Let me do it, Dad!” Darren says, and Geoff passes him the jar.

After they finish their experiment, while Darren is out of earshot, she gives Geoff the look.

“Oh, come on,” he says.

“Literally playing with fire, Geoff? Is that a good idea?”

“It’s science,” he protests, grinning. “It’s educational.”

Although they claimed to have cleared up afterwards, she swept the floor anyway and, sure enough, chased a fine layer of powder into the dustpan. Later, when they were both in bed, she had made coffee for herself. Black coffee. They had used up the whole jar.

* * *

“Darren?” she calls from the landing.

After half a minute, the leaden thump of feet heralds his arrival. From the lounge, the television continues its muffled muttering.

“Do you know anything about this?” she says, pushing at the door of the airing cupboard. It won’t close because it no longer fits its frame. She opens it again and points. The hinges have three holes, but only one of each is occupied by a screw.

“Maybe it was built like that,” he says, “and it’s only just started to sag.”

She folds her arms.

“There might be some spare screws in the garage,” he suggests.

“The question I asked you is ‘do you have anything to do with this?’”

“I didn’t build the house!”

“No, but have you been taking screws out of the hinges?”

He frowns, his mouth half-open in protest. “Why would I do that?”

And now he says it, yes, it does sound like a mad accusation.

He mirrors her by folding his own arms. “Do you know that the screws were there in the first place?”

Of course, she doesn’t. It’s the irrefutable logic of his father.

“Well, then,” he says, tilting his head to one side. “Can I go and watch TV now?”

She nods and manages to avoid swallowing until he has gone back down the stairs. To stop

herself from dwelling on the incident, she goes down to the garage to look for screws. She discovers a collection of laboratory glassware, a geologist's hammer, a jar labelled 'Potassium Nitrate' – all this useless *stuff* he left behind, like an echo; stuff she doesn't have the strength to dispose of. But nothing as practical as a screw. She will have to buy some on Monday.

"Have you finished your homework?" she says on her way back through the lounge, where Darren is watching cartoons.

"Yeah," he says – a single offended syllable.

There's no reason to doubt him. The other teachers are delighted with his progress. He is 'capable', 'diligent'. They also say he's gaining confidence, which is wishful thinking at its blindest. They don't see the disproportionate fears he experiences. A news report about an escaped cheetah in the north of England, a documentary about the effects of nuclear war, any episode of Doctor Who at all – these things can lodge in his mind, like parasitic worms. He won't admit this any more, but she knows it still happens. She sees the effects, and tries to follow the trail back to the cause, like any good historian, but she can never tell for certain. And what would she do with this knowledge anyway? There is no reassuring a child of his imagination. Facts are no substitute for the visions in his head.

She's tried to be more encouraging, but he is too old now to hear the words "well done" without looking pained or patronised. Occasionally she buys his gratitude with a bag of pear drops, just for the pleasure of seeing him scoff the lot, leaving the lounge in a gluey miasma of God knows what chemicals. He has always found them irresistible.

She decides on soup for lunch, but the kitchen cupboards don't yield the tin she's expecting. She bought it on Monday, remembers putting it in the trolley. To accuse Darren of taking things again is simply not on the agenda. And yet, where is the kitchen radio, the dustpan and brush? Why do the enormous rolls of baking foil last so little time? Where does all the food go? It's not like she's starving him. She has theories – that Darren has a den in the woods, that he is continuing the

science experiments somewhere well away from her, that her grief is dragging her further and further from reality.

Instead of soup she uses the frankfurters that are nearing their sell by date. Since there are also no rolls in the house, she sticks them between two slices of buttered bread. No mother should be feeding her son anything that looked so pathetic.

“We were going to have soup,” she says as they eat.

Darren shrugs, lifts a corner of bread and squirts in more ketchup. “Hot dogs are okay.”

“*Over* your plate, not near it,” she says, as the tide of red threatens to slop out.

His head drops. Amazing how quick, how hard, the regret comes. But this time it’s different. Her frustration bursts, like a blister – not with him, but with herself. She has to do something.

* * *

Her opportunity comes after lunch, when Wayne phones to invite Darren round. She puts up a token resistance, then lets him go anyway.

For ten minutes she hesitates, procrastinates, then opens the door to his room. It’s messier than ever. On his desk are empty bottles of all different sizes, a screwdriver, a jar of marbles. She doesn’t really know what she’s looking for until she discovers, under the bed, several large sheets of chipboard. For a moment she wonders where on earth he got them, then notices that their surfaces are painted blue – the same shade they had used for the inside of Darren’s cupboard.

She stands and faces the cupboard door. A distant childhood fear stirs in the room like a breeze. She dispels it by grasping the handle and yanking. The cupboard has been gutted. Its walls are lined entirely with baking foil. On the floor is a spare duvet and two pillows from the airing cupboard, and a large plastic tub, along with several of the items that have gone missing over the last few weeks: the kitchen radio, the torch, batteries.

* * *

“I’ll tell you what,” she says, several hours later, standing in front of the cupboard with Darren,

“if you’re not angry with me, I won’t be angry with you.”

He purses his lips, then gives a sullen nod.

“So,” she says, “tell me what you’re doing?” There’s no way to say it that doesn’t sound like an accusation.

He shrugs.

“Would you have shown your dad?”

He is too young to conceal the conflict in his expression. She allows herself a morsel of hope.

“You really won’t be angry?” he says.

“I promise.”

“You need to do exactly what I say.”

“Okay.”

She sees the scales tip.

“Time me,” he says, pointing at her watch.

He grabs the screwdriver from his desk, and she follows him out to the airing cupboard, where he starts removing the last two screws from the hinges.

He looks up, bites his lip. “You said you wouldn’t ...”

Yes, she did. “Carry on.”

He continues until the door comes free. At his instruction, she helps him carry it into his room and wedge it at an angle inside his cupboard. Then he throws the duvet from his bed on top of it.

“You know what it is?”

She does. It all makes sense – the worm in his mind, in everyone’s mind, really.

“Yes, darling. It’s a fallout shelter.”

He nods vigorously. “Time?”

She glances at her watch. “Three minutes.”

“Brilliant. Get in, quick.”

“Darren ... there isn’t going to be a –”

“You don’t know that. Portsmouth is only a few miles that way.” He points, in the correct direction. “The Russians will bomb the naval base.”

In her husband’s voice she hears a dozen objections to this scheme: the shelter should be downstairs, it should be lined with lead or concrete, he should be stockpiling a lot more water. Not that any of this would make a difference.

Her own objection is at once simpler, and more complicated: this isn’t healthy for him, and she can’t be seen to encourage it.

“Mum ...” Darren’s legs twitch with energy. “It has to be within four minutes.”

She has always been the one telling Darren to stop, even when Geoff was still around. She is so tired of being the villain. It’s just a den. Every kid makes a den.

She climbs in and Darren follows, pulling the cupboard shut with a piece of string taped to the edge of the door. A click, and the torch light comes on.

“Look.” He opens the plastic tub, revealing a stash of food – most of it tinned – bowls, spoons, a tin opener. Stuffed in one corner she finds a minor miracle: an unopened bag of pear drops.

“Strictly not to be opened yet,” he explains. “After the bombs drop, luxuries will be at a premium.”

The words are not quite his. Where have they come from?

“You know,” he says, “now we’re in here, we can’t go back out for two days.”

Kidnapped by her own son. She should be laughing, but she won’t – he would take it the wrong way. And besides, she’s touched that he’s reserved her a haven for the apocalypse.

“Two days? Okay.” She will stay here as long as it takes. She has the patience to outlast him – Darren will be first to suggest they leave the shelter. When they emerge and he sees the world is unchanged, perhaps it will help him get this out of his system.

He produces three copies of *2000 AD* from the back of the shelter and flips to a Judge Dredd

story, then hands her the paperback of Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea Trilogy* she gave him for his birthday.

"These will help us pass the time."

"Right."

With the torch wedged at a suitable angle for them both, they settle down to read, as if this was a completely normal thing to do on a Saturday evening. It takes some wriggling before they are both comfortable. He ends up in the foetal position, with her curled round him. His body is warm.

After a couple of pages, she says, "You know, Darren, it really won't happen."

His silence carries more weight than any refusal. Difficult to reason with someone when they even won't talk to you. Geoff would know how to draw him into a conversation. How did he do it? Usually with an appeal to science or logic. He would hook Darren with a puzzle or some intriguing proposition, then proceed, step by step, towards a conclusion that would make his fear seem absurd.

She continues turning the pages, pretending to read, until she has worked out something that is worth a try.

"Darren, if you wanted to be voted in as the leader of a country, how clever would you have to be?"

"Very clever, I suppose."

"And ..." No easy way to say this "... how much does it hurt when someone dies?"

He doesn't reply, but then it isn't really a question.

"So," she says, "if you had the chance to kill more people than ever before, would that be a clever thing to do?"

She hopes for a "no", but will settle for a counter-argument, a refusal, anything at all. But the worm has burrowed deep. He returns to his comic, and she suppresses a sigh, weary with these endless attempts to second-guess her son's state of mind.

She has pushed enough already. Can't she just enjoy being with Darren for once, doing

something they both enjoy? How many more moments like this will there be? So easy to assume they'll be numberless, never-ending.

They won't.

Darren shifts position again. She hears the rustle of a plastic packet and cranes her neck to see what he is doing. He turns to her, his face bright in the glare of the torch, and offers her a pear drop.