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ELSEWHERE
in
SUCCESS

He knew where to dig. He'd been given the tip-off by one of their neighbours just a couple of weeks after he and Louisa moved in to the house in Success.

He'd been surveying the garden, thinking of excavating the building rubble that had been left on site, and making plans for incorporating it into a retaining wall. The man, whose name faded from memory almost as soon as Harry had heard it – something beginning with a B – had seen him from across the road, and wandered over for a yarn. As he was leaving, he'd mentioned the buried lawnmower.

'It's just to the left of the bougainvillea.'

'You're kidding,' Harry had said.

Louisa seemed to find the news unsettling. 'You should let sleeping dogs lie,' she said, but Harry wasn't one for appreciating the value of sleeping dogs. In the cool of the late afternoon, he took out his shovel.

Louisa came outside to watch. She told him she was half expecting to see someone attached to the other end.

'No, nobody,' he said.

'Why would he do that?' she asked.

'He couldn't get it started. According to Bevan.'

'Who's Bevan?'

'The guy across the road.'

'Brian.'

'According to Brian.'

The excavation wasn't easy. It took it out of both of them – Harry, physically, and Louisa, in the emotional sense. When the job was done, they poured themselves a glass of wine and stood before the unearthed relic until the light was almost gone. It stayed there for a week, as a bizarre reminder of something, Louisa had said.

Of what, she couldn't be sure.

CHAPTER ONE

Harry usually does the gardening, but he's out today; Louisa is cleaning up outside, sweeping the driveway. Across the road, kids are playing cricket. The boy with red hair makes contact, and yet another tennis ball skims across the road, catching the local flock of cockatoos by surprise. They fly off. Louisa fetches the ball and throws it back.

'Thanks.'

Play resumes. Next door to the cricketers, Brian starts up a chainsaw, preparing to eliminate his final tree before the onset of winter. It's autumn already, but still feels like the middle of summer. Louisa is tempted to give up on the sweeping and go inside, but she sticks it out.

The noise from the chainsaw stops and starts, but the noise goes on longer than the periods of quiet. When the chainsaw stops a mower will start up. That's how it always is. One power tool triggers another.

As she sweeps, Louisa vaguely wonders about the secret lives going on in the surrounding houses – what the women do while the men are outside with their power tools. Nothing comes to mind. Her thoughts inexplicably jump to the man who buried the lawnmower in their front garden those years

ago. She thinks she understands how he must have felt. She considers her own meagre efforts – her lack of any real interest, patience, perseverance, when it comes to the gardening. He might have been something of a kindred spirit. Or maybe in a suburb called Success, he thought that failure was the only possible alternative.

Harry has taken off for an afternoon alone with Buster. They drive to the dog beach where Harry swims, with Buster watching anxiously from the shore and rushing at the waves to bark and bite at them. Harry keeps an old roasting tray in the car for Buster's drink after he has dried them both off with a ragged beach towel – a gift from Yasamine twenty or so years ago. He drives towards the Round House in Fremantle. The old convict lockup, cast as tourist attraction, is too sanitised for Harry's taste, but it's a destination with a view over the sea. They park, walk, and climb the hill to look down on Bathers Beach. He lets Buster off the lead as soon as they are out of sight and the dog races ahead.

Today, when they reach the top, there is a man playing didge, with a hat in front of him. It's not the best place for buskers, pretty slim pickings today actually, but this doesn't seem to worry the guy. He makes the didge talk and poke fun at them as they pass. Buster responds by barking and baulking at the end of the instrument, and the musician obliges by matching his sound, confusing him, and giving Harry such a buzz that he reaches into his pocket and drops a small note into the hat. He tells the guy that he used to play the sax. No more about himself, but they talk generally of music, mixes, production and fusion. It's a story he'll share with Louisa when he gets home. These small things make life worth the effort – not that he's depressed as such. There are fewer moments like this to hold his interest as he gets older, moments worth keeping for future reference. Harry and his dog hover until self-consciousness intrudes. Then

they wander on down the steps and across the road, before looping back towards the carpark. It's almost five o'clock and time to be getting on, but it's still hot, and even here, right by the ocean, there is no relief.

The chainsaw has stopped, and a mower has started. People are going about their business. Louisa continues to sweep.

Past midnight the soundscape is bound to change. Security guards will be patrolling the streets. Hoons will be doing burnouts at two or three in the morning, leaving their oversized rubber tags between speed humps on the straighter sections of road. Occasionally, rubbish bins will be set alight.

These are the nights that Louisa holds her breath, waiting for the crash, tempted to pray, willing them all to calm down and go home to bed. She'll lie staring at the outline of the lump that is Harry asleep on the side of the bed nearest the window. He'll have taken something on top of something else to make him sleep. As she lies awake she'll be sending out this thought: What about your mother? Think what you're doing to her. Just think.

Technically Harry knows he shouldn't have let Buster off the lead, but he likes to see him run free. Those white-collar psychopaths on the local councils prefer to keep everything under tight control, or else it's a cynical ploy to extract funds from an unsuspecting public. They have their bloody signs erected everywhere – do this, don't do that – enough to make a perfect saint break the law.

By the time he sees the ranger it's too late. Women in uniform have never done a thing for him. It's possible she senses this and it feeds her resentment. In hindsight he realises he made some stupid mistakes from a distance that just ended up making her more determined to hunt him down. Women are particularly good at picking up on body language. He'd tried hiding himself and Buster behind some

scrub, not in a furtive sort of way, more casual than that, as if they'd decided to take the long way round, but the woman had spotted them, was onto it, and was making a beeline. If Louisa had been with him, she would have told him to smile and act nice, but she wasn't, and he didn't.

Louisa moves around to the side pergola and starts sweeping there, cleaning up the leaves of the constantly shedding evergreens, marri and jarrah, mixed with flowers from the bougainvillea. There must be a slight breeze higher up, because more leaves drop as she works. A flock of galahs passes overhead, swings round, and lands on her side of the street, where the cockatoos were earlier. She likes these birds because they're so ordinary, and because they have a funny walk with their big heads and squat bodies. She stops sweeping and watches them waddling around, picking at the grass. She wonders how she looks to them.

The woman is not amused. Harry tries charm, compliments her on the uniform. She wouldn't trust him as far as she could throw him. (By the look of her she could throw him some way.) To make things worse, Buster is now crouching to relieve himself in the middle of the footpath, and Harry hasn't brought a plastic bag.

'The council should supply them,' he says, making a grand, sweeping gesture with his hand, to indicate where the fault really lies.

'Didn't you read the signs?' she counters with what Harry considers to be an unnecessary level of aggression in her voice.

'I didn't see any signs.'

Her upper lip slips into a cynical smile. She has a notebook with her for writing out fines, which she does with practised efficiency before ripping out the page and handing it to him. She's caught quite a few today, she tells him. Don't quote me. She was just about to knock off – five more minutes and

she would have missed him altogether. Rubbing salt into the wound. He's made her day. She's ruined his.

He takes a detour, swings past Clancy's and settles Buster on the back seat of the car with a biscuit bone before going in.

Louisa is creating small mounds of dirt and leaves which she will later shovel into the bin. It's been some time since they have done anything to the backyard apart from the watering. There are leaves everywhere. It's not the best weather for physical activity, but something needs to be done. Today the air is so dry and hot that the eucalypts could be easily set alight with a careless match. She stops thinking that, afraid a person can give thoughts the power to make things happen, just by thinking them. The image of a bushfire, a wildfire, jumps into her mind. Forget that, she tells herself. Think of something else – the colour of leaves changing. The leaves catch alight. She puts them out with a bucket of water.

The sun is lower in the sky. She wonders where Harry is.

Harry's thinking to have a quick drink to calm his nerves before driving home under the limit. He's just turned away from the bar with his pint when he spots Carole and Gordon in the corner of the room. Carole has seen him at the same time and is waving him over to their table, where they are waiting for a meal to be served.

'Why don't you join us?'

'Why not?'

He places his beer on the table and goes up to order. Normally he'd have made some excuse, but he's feeling burnt and welcomes the opportunity to debrief. When he returns to the table he brings the conversation round at the earliest opportunity.

'What a bitch!' says Gordon.

'The power goes to their heads,' says Carole. 'They love their rules, don't they?'

Harry immediately warms towards them both. He's met them a few times before, but they're Louisa's friends rather than his. She catches up with Carole on a regular basis, and every now and then they bring the blokes in.

Without Louisa there, the dynamics are different. He's enjoying himself more as the evening deepens, and Carole seems more attentive than usual. Time passes quickly. Gordon turns out to be a great bloke, and Carole is becoming increasingly attractive as the night goes on. It's the beer goggles, Harry supposes. He watches himself, but Gordon seems pretty cool with the whole thing, as if he's used to it. Harry's eyes linger on the hint of cleavage in the V of her dress. Not that anything happens. Not that it will.

Still, he can't help feeling a bit guilty. They will part reluctantly after several hours. By the time he gets home Louisa will be fast asleep, or pretending to be. She'll have left the front light on for him. She's not such a bad old stick. Not bad at all.

Louisa is sweeping, sweeping, sweeping. One spot is extremely clean, a little oasis of calm in a desert of shifting dunes. She is no longer in the moment. Victor is standing bent over Tom, who is at the kitchen table doing his homework. With effort she pushes the image down and covers it up.

'Stop it,' she says. 'Just stop.'

This happens every time she does housework or works in the garden. She can't afford to think too much. She should get someone in once or twice a week.

Disciplined thinking is different at work where she communicates using PowerPoint. In the public service, she keeps it simple with dot points – none of that thing with words sweeping in from every direction in an attempt to keep people awake. It doesn't work, and anyway, she can't be responsible for everything and everyone. All she needs to do is follow the script she's been given and stick to the rules.

It has been some time now since she decided that she doesn't mind rules after all. There is safety there, keeping everything in its place. It's not easy, and that's good. It takes focus.

As Harry takes his leave, Carole leans in and plants a good one right on his lips. He feels somewhat embarrassed, but Gordon seems not to have noticed.

'We should all catch up soon,' Gordon says, and his Scottish accent exaggerates the goodwill that the invitation suggests.

'Yes,' says Carole, and then, making Harry doubt the significance of what has just happened, 'Tell Louisa I'll give her a call.'

'Okay,' he says. 'Okay, I'll let her know.'

'Take it easy,' says Gordon. 'Keep an eye out for any flashing lights.'

'No. No, I'm right,' he says. 'I'm good.'

Harry pulls into the driveway. The television is on and the door is open. Louisa is still up. He turns off the engine and sits listening to the radio before he goes in.

Louisa has the television on, but it's just background noise. She is hunched over her cup of hot chocolate, warming her hands. Surprisingly, the temperature has dropped suddenly with the onset of evening.

There is a problem she has been trying to solve for a long time now, but she can't articulate it. It's something she feels, something wordless. It's been there since she was a child, but this getting older seems to intensify things – emotional things. It occurs to her that she might be pinning everything on to Tom when it's not to do with him at all. She doesn't like the thought. It feels disloyal, as if she's been using him somehow. Things distort the more she thinks them through, the more time passes.

Sometimes she wonders about that. What if she has been trapped here forever, in endless cycles of wax and wane? What if her boy never existed, if she imagined the whole thing? What if he is a trick of the mind? Can she trust her senses, her memories of events?

She seems to remember herself as a small child travelling in the back of a car towards a mirage on a distant piece of road.

‘Water,’ she says to her father.

‘Let’s see if we can catch it,’ he says.

But when they get there it has moved to the next rise, and then to the next.

They never do catch it. It makes her want to cry.

CHAPTER TWO

Harry considers himself to be a good listener, but not when he's under attack. Over breakfast, Louisa hasn't stopped talking for at least ten minutes. She's on a roll.

'I don't suppose it ever occurred to you that I might like a nice night out at Clancy's, catching up with friends?'

'It wasn't exactly planned, Louisa.'

'And why do you have to deliberately rub people up the wrong way? You'd think you'd have learned a little diplomacy by now. By this time in your life. I suppose you expect me to pay the fine.'

'I don't expect anything of the sort. I pay my own fines.'

'You don't pay your own fines.'

'Well, I don't expect you to pay them.'

'And what then, Harry? You leave it and the next thing you know, everything descends into chaos. Next thing we're getting threatening letters. The phone gets cut off.'

'It's got nothing to do with the phone.'

'Same thing.'

'It's not the same thing.'

'Leave it to me, you said. Leave it to me.'

‘Well? What does it matter who pays the phone?’

That throws her, the art of the non sequitur, his strategic amnesia, his sheer dogged refusal to engage in her version of reality. Besides, Harry has a theory: a point is never won unless it is conceded. She seems to recognise the ploy. She takes another tack.

‘While you were out kicking up your heels, I had a horrible day trying to clean up the mess.’ She’s looking upset. ‘It’s not easy you know.’

‘I do most of the gardening,’ he points out.

‘That’s not what I’m saying, Harry.’ She’s exasperated with him. He knows her well enough to see there’s no point talking when she’s like this. Better to cut his losses.

‘I know,’ he says, patting her arm, looking around for a way out. ‘I know.’ It’s not what she wants, but it’s the best he can do. His eye catches the appointment card on the fridge.

‘What date is it today?’

‘Why?’

‘I thought you were supposed to be seeing that Lucy woman today. Have you cancelled your appointment?’

Her face tells him what he’d suspected. She’s forgotten again.

‘That’s just great, Harry! Why didn’t you say something?’

‘I just did.’ He smiles. It doesn’t come out quite right. There is something too smug in his tone of voice. So smug that he notices it himself. So does she, apparently. She stops.

‘We’ll need to talk about this some more, Harry, when I get home.’

‘And what time will that be? Just so I know when to make myself scarce.’

He squeezes out the last word as she turns away, but she doesn’t look back.

Lucy has flowers on her desk: purple, yellow. This startles Louisa. She’s told her about the flowers. Is it coincidence?

Is the counsellor playing games with her? She gives her the benefit of the doubt. She decides to recount the thoughts she's been having again, about the roadside memorial. Lucy tells her to close her eyes and counts her into a state of deep relaxation.

'Tell me about the memorial, Louisa,' she says.

Louisa speaks with some effort. 'I'm driving straight up to it, but it isn't any closer. I'm getting out of the car. There's a big hill in front of me. I'm climbing this hill – it goes on forever. There are ants crawling up my legs.' Louisa stamps her feet in a frenzy.

'What's happening now?'

'Biting me.'

'They've stopped,' says Lucy. 'They've gone away. They've all gone away. Go on, keep climbing. You're at the top now. What can you see?'

Louisa calms down, becomes still. 'A cross, white cross. There's a name.'

'What name?'

'Tom, I think. I can't see for sure. I'm finding it hard to see it.'

'Try. Tell me what you see.'

'It's very old, very old. The wood is split and the paint is cracked. Yellowing and peeling off. There are dead flowers about. Nobody has been here for a very long time.'

'How can you tell?'

Louisa speaks slowly. 'Feels abandoned. The ground is hard, gravelly, as if the keeper of the memorial has gone away. No, more than that, there's ... a feeling of abuse. It's as if a bouquet were carefully placed here, and then kicked to pieces. There's a curled-up photograph lying on the gravel at the base of the cross, but I can't see what it's of.' She's agitated again. 'I don't want this. I don't want this, Tom.'

'What's happening?'

'He's walking away from me. Come back here, young man! Tom, you come right back here this minute! How can you be

so stupid?’ Louisa shifts around in her chair impatiently. ‘It’s not necessary.’

‘What’s not necessary, Louisa?’

‘This ... this cross here. This pain here.’ She pushes her fists into her stomach. Her face is tight with grief.

‘You’re okay,’ says Lucy. ‘You’re all right, Louisa. You’re relaxed and in control.’ Lucy is silent for a moment, leaving Louisa waiting with her eyes closed before she speaks again. She pitches her voice low, to reassure. ‘As I count to ten I want you to gradually come back to this room, this place, feeling calm, relaxed, energised. One ... two – feeling more relaxed – three ... four ... five – calm and in control – six ... seven ... eight – energised and alert – open your eyes when you feel you want to – nine ... ten – fully awake, alert, relaxed.’

Louisa sits absolutely still and heavy in the chair. After a moment she says, ‘I can smell formic acid.’

Lucy stares at her. ‘Tell me what’s happening for you right now.’

‘I’m devastated, as ever,’ Louisa says, but guards her face with the hint of a smile, attempts to stop her darting thoughts, to slow down, to think of nothing but her own breath going in and out. She breathes, but it’s not easy.

Silence follows. With some effort she meets Lucy’s eyes.

‘No. Sorry, I’m not ready,’ she tells her. ‘I thought I was, but I’m not. My mind’s a complete blank.’ She laughs apologetically. ‘It’s a blessing really.’

No response. Lucy uses silence like a knife, cutting into Louisa’s attempt at humour, exposing it for what it is. Once she has registered that Louisa has seen her point, she speaks.

‘And how are things with Harry?’

‘He’s infuriating, as ever.’

‘Why, what happened?’

‘Oh, you know, it’s nothing really. It’s me, I suppose, expecting something and then getting annoyed when he doesn’t deliver. I just wish he’d back me up a bit more, that’s all.’

‘Anything specific? Can you give me an example?’

‘I don’t know. There was this thing about him going out for the afternoon and not coming back until, you know, late. Midnight, when I expected him around five. He didn’t have his mobile with him.’ She punctuates the statement with a laugh. ‘I mean that’s the whole stupid thing about it. Here I am really trying to make some sort of connection with him and he doesn’t even think to take his mobile with him when he goes out, so what chance do I have?’

‘Weren’t you worried when he didn’t turn up?’

‘No, not really. I might have. I don’t know. No, he can take care of himself.’

‘Sure.’

Louisa says nothing, shifts in her seat. She wonders how much more time she has.

‘Where was he?’

‘It’s a whole long story. He got a fine in Fremantle for having his dog off the lead and then thought he’d pull into the pub to drown his sorrows, and a couple of my friends were there. So instead of letting me know, he sat drinking with them all night, while I was stuck at home on my own.’

‘Have you talked to him about it?’

‘I tried. Not really. Don’t look at me like that, Lucy. It’s not that easy trying to pin him down. Any hint of an in-depth discussion and he wriggles out of it. He thinks I’m arguing with him. I’m not. I’m just trying to make some sort of connection. Talk to him heart-to-heart, you know, but he gets annoyed with me. I said I was going to discuss it further when I got home, but I don’t think I’ll bother. I don’t want to push it too far.’

‘Push what?’

‘My luck, I suppose.’

Louisa closes off her face and her voice, ending the line of questioning. She glances at her wristwatch, crosses her legs and jiggles her dangling foot up and down in a kicking motion.

Lucy stares at her foot. Louisa holds it still then replaces it on the floor.

‘I’ve got something else on this afternoon,’ she says. ‘Sorry.’

Lucy opens her mouth then changes her mind about what she was going to say. She looks concerned.

‘Do you want to stop there for today?’

‘I think so. I’m so tired. I didn’t get much sleep.’

‘Are you still listening to your CDs?’

‘Not really.’

‘You don’t have to. Only if it helps.’

‘I know.’

Lucy closes Louisa’s file and pushes it to the corner of her desk, stands and smooths out the wrinkles from her skirt. ‘You have to work at it, of course.’ Still smoothing.

‘I love your skirt,’ says Louisa.

Lucy looks pleased.

‘Thanks,’ she says.

‘I wish I could wear skirts like that.’

Lucy smiles.

‘I’ll be away for the next few weeks, as I said. You have the locum’s number if you need to make an appointment in the meantime, don’t you?’

‘I’ll be okay.’

‘Have you started doing your art yet?’ asks Lucy as Louisa is leaving.

‘I’ve been thinking about it.’

‘Fantastic!’ says Lucy. ‘Next step is to do something about it.’

Louisa drives from Lucy’s West Perth office to a vantage point in Kings Park where she can see the changes in the city as the sun descends, the peak-hour traffic builds, and the lights switch on. Despite the heat, the days are getting shorter.

A man walks past the front of the car, glances sideways, catches her watching him, bows his head and hurries on. Louisa carries an unused visual diary and a box of coloured

pencils in the glove box. She opens the diary but can't bring herself to make the first mark, so she leans back in the seat and falls asleep. By the time she wakes, feeling chilled, the traffic has already built up and died down. Harry doesn't bat an eye when she walks in hours late. He glances up from the TV.

'Good session?' he says.

CHAPTER THREE

Overnight it pours. The small front passes, leaving everything sparkling and refreshed. Outside the sky is clear and the day is warming up. Harry has turned the radio on to his usual community station and a local Elvis impersonator is doing 'Love Me Tender'. Harry sends it up, singing along in his best generic American accent, drops to one knee and holds out his arms for the big finale. He bellows the last note and holds position, waiting for her applause. She's not in the mood.

On the table is a vase of flowers from the weekend before. Louisa touches one of the yellow flowers lightly with her left index finger and watches its petals drift onto the lace surface.

Harry struggles to his feet. He looks a little disappointed by her lacklustre response. He whips a tea towel over his shoulder, draws on his extra-large rubber gloves, starts the dishes and switches to the song that is now playing on the radio.

'You can have my sheila but don't touch my akubra,' he sings.

'Oh for goodness sake!' she says in mock exasperation. She smiles, and he is encouraged to sing more loudly. 'Stop it,' she wails, deciding to throw herself in completely. 'Next thing you'll have the dogs joining in.'

Today there are two dogs, one borrowed. Louisa rises

awkwardly from the table, stepping over them. They have defied the rules of the house and entered the restricted area of the dining room. They have a doggy smell that she tries to cover with citrus room freshener, but the dogs won't have it. They smell even more, out of spite.

She claims she's not a dog person, but her hand goes out to give each of them a pat as she passes. They wag their tails and look for food.

She stands by the sink to watch Harry do the dishes.

'What are you doing?' she asks him.

'What do you mean?'

'Are you making all that noise because you think I should be doing the dishes?'

He is rattling away with the cutlery, creating a sort of washing machine effect in the water that he insists is an efficient way to clean the knives and forks. She is distracted by thoughts of having to do them again once he leaves the sink. He doesn't care. Her presence gives him the opportunity to perform.

He sings loudly. 'The guy with the perfect grin is standing imprudently still.'

She laughs. 'Talking about yourself?'

'An oldie, but a goodie.'

'An oldie,' she says, but her mind is elsewhere. What was she thinking a moment ago? She was imagining a more innocent time, a happier time, thinking about something that happened when she was at school, but she can't remember what it was. The past slips away. The future on the other hand seems relentlessly fixed, as if she is walking into an ever-narrowing funnel of – of what? Possibilities? Impossibilities?

That's it. She was thinking that she should have been more pig-headed, because at school she'd wanted to be a pilot, or an archaeologist, but her parents had dissuaded her. Only very clever boys became pilots, and only rich people became archaeologists, they'd told her. That was just the way it was.

‘Why?’ she’d said, but can’t recall the answer. The real question is why wasn’t she more argumentative as a teenager? Perhaps she was. When did she learn to be so acquiescent?

‘The way we were,’ murmurs Louisa, prompting Harry to throw in a verse of ‘Memories’ before falling into silence again.

The radio has also dropped out.

Perhaps it is too quiet.

Harry has loosened his grip on a wet glass. It slips through his glove to the ceramic tiled floor and explodes.

‘Shit!’

He has a very loud voice and seems to enjoy overdramatising everyday events.

‘SHIT!’

He has put too many suds in the water. He does this all the time, and glasses often slide from his grasp. Louisa sighs heavily, gets the brush and pan and brings everything back to equilibrium.

‘Do you want me to finish off?’ she says.

He doesn’t respond. She doesn’t know whether he is going a bit deaf or ignoring her.

‘Do you want me to finish off?’ she says, raising her voice, and speaking clearly.

He gives nothing away, goes back to his singing, mumbling the words this time. She watches him. He seems okay.

He sinks back into his task, apparently refreshed by the little burst of adrenalin, an occasional extrovert living with a frequent introvert. She wonders, not for the first time, how he would react if something really big were to happen. He wouldn’t have anywhere left to go.

Harry decides it is best to be careful with what he says. He is thinking about Yasamine, so it’s best he says nothing. He doesn’t want to slip up and call Louisa the wrong name, so there are times when he avoids calling her anything at all. Sometimes he calls her ‘dear’ for fun, or when he’s annoyed with her, or

wants to present himself as if he is in an old-fashioned movie.

He agitates the sudsy water even more than before. The water slops over the edge of the sink and runs back along the grooves of the draining board. Some splashes on the floor. He imagines Yasamine doing the washing up. She is wearing an apron, and has her hair done up in some sort of thirties or forties style.

Sometimes he thinks he was born a couple of generations too late. He could have been a Cary Grant or Humphrey Bogart. He glances across at Louisa, at the stain on her top where she has rubbed against something grubby, and at her untidy hair. He can't think what sort of movie he should put her in. He decides that it's best to try to stick to the facts after all, here and now, things right in front of his face, in his face.

'In yer face,' he mumbles. 'In yer face.'

'I don't know about you sometimes, Harry,' she says, but he won't be sidetracked.

He feels himself sinking. He needs to surface. He needs to shout out and thrash about. He thinks about the value of primal scream therapy and wonders if she might not be better off doing that. At least it would give her a bit of something. Life. She needs to stop holding things in.

'GAHHH ...' he bellows out of the blue, but this time she ignores him, ignores his larger expressions of anguish. She has grown used to him. She can't even be bothered humouring him anymore.

He often sings and makes jokes for her and deliberately drops things to wake them both up. He tries to kickstart his mind but it winds up slowly, resisting at every point. He wants to stir things up. She tries to calm everything down. It's a battle of wills.

He'll pointedly ignore her. She probably thinks he's going a bit deaf. He smiles to himself. He wonders about boiling point under pressure. He should take bets. He chuckles. He feels a little guilty.

Louisa stares out of the window. The roses will need pruning in the next month or two, but they never stop flowering long enough to allow her to choose the best moment. As her gaze falls on Buddha, she decides she is meditating.

Buddha in the garden is a recent addition, but he might have been there forever. He sits unmoved among the falling rose petals, or when the rain falls. Yesterday he sat unmoved as a snail travelled across his generous earlobe.

When Buddha first arrived, Buster approached him cautiously, tail pointing straight out, as if his instinct were to back off in that direction. He finally gathered his courage, tentatively leaned in, sniffed Buddha, relaxed and refrained from lifting his leg, thus pronouncing him benign yet deserving of respect. Later when Jessie, the borrowed dog, came to visit, Buster introduced her to Buddha, but she was more interested in the tennis ball that Buster had provisionally discarded. He let her play with it – tennis balls appeared in the yard on a regular basis. He wasn't particularly attached to that one.

Louisa is not a Buddhist, but she is attracted to the idea of non-attachment. She tries teaching a version of it in her work. As far as rules go, she says that they are a choice and that it is a good discipline to follow them to the letter, but not to be too attached to them. It's good to step away from them occasionally to see if they are still working.

'It is important not to be too rigid about that,' she says to her workshop with middle management.

'I'm no hippy,' she says, 'but even so it's good to be a bit flexible sometimes. It's useful to practise adjusting your thinking, to allow for some leakage, a level of uncertainty. It works for me,' she tells them. 'As messy and complicated as it gets, I always allow for more than two possibilities. Even when there are obviously only two possibilities!'

This is where she pauses and waits for a response. It's her one little joke, but nobody smiles.

‘So,’ she says, ‘in management, flexibility is more important than anything else. That means being able to respond quickly, which isn’t so easy if you’re always thinking in absolute terms of right and wrong.’

There’s the inevitable dissenter, the guy who butts in all the way through and makes the workshop run behind time.

‘I don’t agree with you,’ he says. ‘If I did that I’d never make a decision. I wouldn’t get anything done.’

She nods as though she’s considering what he’s said, then presses on. ‘When I was younger,’ she says, ‘like most young people, I was caught up in the seeming incontrovertibility of binary logic – black and white thinking for those unfamiliar with the jargon – and I didn’t understand the implications of containing the world in oppositional thinking. Depending on your premise, you can win an argument from either side. You can justify anything at all, even if it is highly destructive.’

Tom pushes against her line of thought, interrupting.

‘Each judgemental idea embraces its enemy,’ she says, ‘as much as you might try to deny, or challenge, or expel it.’

She loses her train of thought. There must be a discernible gap in her presentation because people begin to shift in their seats. She’s losing them. She smiles. It is important to keep things together at work.

She calls a tea break.

‘Morning tea. Apparently we have Danish pastries, coffee, tea and chocolate biscuits out there. Yum,’ she says. ‘Fifteen, twenty minutes?’

Louisa stares at the Buddha, seeking answers. He smiles back. A magpie lark is pecking at something on the ground next to him. Harry is rattling away at the front flywire door, trying to fix the latch.

Tom used to say, if you win, you lose. Then he’d laugh. When you lose, you win. What did he want to win? What did he think he had to lose? With Tom, everything was always the

wrong way round. He opposed everything she tried to teach him. He'd say, 'Don't plan for the future. Put yourself first. Act first, think later.'

He'd always been impulsive. It was in his nature. If something occurred to him, he'd do it regardless of pain. When he was quite small, he'd repeatedly hit his forehead against the wall. She'd distract him and, a couple of hours later, find him doing it again. When he was older, he'd hold his hand over a candle flame, to see how close he could get.

'All right. You've proved your point,' she'd say.

'There is no point.'

No point. Words hold clues. Her sister Zoe used to follow her opinions by a question: 'Does that make sense?' When did she start that? Had someone once challenged her ability to make sense so that she had to keep checking back? She'd use it like punctuation at the end of a sentence. It's the sort of thing that doesn't let a person off the hook. It makes them pay attention, like a kid that might be singled out and tested on what the teacher just said. It gets stuck in a person's head like an ear worm. Does that make sense? It makes a person feel quite irritated, because even when things are obvious it makes them have to confirm that. Of course it makes sense. Except that these days Louisa also increasingly feels that it is important to check the same thing. The virus of self-doubt is easily caught.

Seeing is believing – there's another one. Louisa thinks of Tom, switches it around, says, I'll see it when I believe it.

Believing is the hard bit. Seeing follows.

What can she see?

She sees some sort of fuzzy stuff in the space between herself and the wall. After she cleans her glasses it is still there.

She reaches her hand out, into the space. Her hand tingles. Her heart and her jaw ache.

'Is that you, Tom?' she says. 'Is that you?'

The space doesn't answer.

Neither does Harry. He is out of earshot. He has stopped rattling at the door and has gone into the bedroom.

Sometimes when she is semi-relaxed, Louisa allows herself the luxury of trusting that things are as they appear. On those rare days she holds Harry too long in their goodnight embrace. He has his own issues. After tolerating her uncharacteristic intimacy for a few seconds he shrugs her off.

Louisa hears the water start. He is taking a shower. She considers walking in on him, standing beside him beneath the falling water, bringing them both back to life, but she thinks better of it. He has the door to the bedroom ajar but that to the en suite closed behind him. He has started singing something unrecognisable and apparently wordless – a kind of tortured yodel. Buster sleeps in the passage. The other dog follows Louisa about, looking hopeful. She holds out her empty palms to show that she has nothing to offer, but the dog misses the point completely, and persists.

A moment later, both dogs have started barking because a van has pulled up outside the house. A man, a stranger, sits there in the driver's seat, not getting out, speaking on his mobile phone. It is late afternoon.

Louisa pushes the vertical blind aside and watches him. He looks young, around his late twenties, about the same age that Tom would have been now. In a parallel universe Tom might be sitting in a white van outside some woman's house, talking on his mobile phone. He might be living his life somewhere. He might have a wife and a child at home. It looks as though this young man has dark hair and is wearing a white business shirt. Louisa thinks that if he weren't sitting in a van, he could easily be a real-estate salesman or a Mormon. He doesn't turn his head, but perhaps he senses her looking at him, because he finishes his conversation, and drives off. The dogs settle down.

Harry calls out from the shower to say that he has forgotten

his towel and could Louisa get it off the line for him. Buster barks to reinforce his request, just in case she missed it. The other dog struggles to her feet to be on stand-by in case she is needed.

Nothing else of note happens today.