

THE GIRL BEFORE

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For Ollie and Nicholas

Mr Darkwood, once so interested in romantic love and whatever anyone had to say about it, was now thoroughly sick of the topic. Why did these lovers always repeat themselves? Didn't they ever get tired of hearing themselves talk?

Eve Ottenberg, *The Widow's Opera*

Like all addicts, signature killers work from a script, engaging in repetitive behaviour to the point of obsessiveness.

Robert D. Keppel and William J. Birnes, *Signature Killers*

We may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.

Sigmund Freud, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*

My fascination with letting images repeat and repeat – or in film's case 'run on' – manifests my belief that we spend much of our lives seeing without observing.

Andy Warhol

1. *Please make a list of every possession you consider essential to your life.*

Then: Emma

It's a lovely little flat, the letting agent says with what could almost pass for genuine enthusiasm. Close to the amenities. And you've got that private bit of roof. That could become a sun terrace, subject of course to the freeholder's consent.

Nice, Simon agrees, trying not to catch my eye. I'd known the flat was no good as soon as I saw that six-foot stretch of roof below one of the windows. Si knows it too but he doesn't want to tell the agent, or at least not so soon it'll seem rude. He might even hope that if I listen to the man's stupid patter long enough I'll waver. The agent's Simon's kind of bloke: sharp, laddish, eager. He probably reads the magazine Simon works for. They were exchanging football chat before we even got up the stairs.

And here you've got a decent-size bedroom, the agent's saying. With ample—

It's no good, I interrupt, cutting short the charade. It's not right for us.

The agent raises his eyebrows. You can't be too choosy in this market, he says. This'll be gone by tonight. Five viewings today, and it's not even on our website yet.

It's not secure enough, I say flatly. Shall we go?

There are locks on all the windows, he points out. Plus a Chubb

on the door. You could always install a burglar alarm, if security's a particular concern. I don't think the landlord would have any objection.

He's talking across me now, to Simon. *Particular concern.* He might as well have said, *Oh, is the girlfriend a bit of a drama queen?*

I'll wait outside, I say, turning to leave.

Realising he's blundered, the agent adds, If it's the area that's the problem, perhaps you should have a think further west.

We already have, Simon says. It's all out of our budget. Apart from the ones the size of a teabag.

He's trying to keep the frustration out of his voice, but the fact that he needs to riles me even more.

There's a one-bed in Queen's Park, the agent says. A bit grotty, but . . .

We looked at it, Simon says. In the end, we felt it was just a bit too close to that estate.

His tone makes it clear that *we* means *she*.

Or there's a third-floor just come on in Kilburn—

That too. There was a drainpipe next to one of the windows.

The agent looks puzzled.

Someone could have climbed it, Simon explains.

Right. Well, the letting season's only just started. Perhaps if you wait a bit.

The agent has clearly decided we're time-wasters. He too is sidling towards the door. I go and stand outside, on the landing, so he won't come near me.

We've already given notice on our old place, I hear Simon say. We're running out of options. He lowers his voice. Look, mate, we

THE GIRL BEFORE

were burgled. Five weeks ago. Two men broke in and threatened Emma with a knife. You can see why she'd be a bit jumpy.

Oh, the agent says. Shit. If someone did that to my girlfriend I don't know what I'd do. Look, this might be a long shot, but . . . His voice trails off.

Yes? Simon says.

Has anyone at the office mentioned One Folgate Street to you?

I don't think so. Has it just come on?

Not exactly, no.

The agent seems unsure whether to pursue this or not.

But it's available? Simon persists.

Technically, yes, the agent says. And it's a fantastic property. Absolutely fantastic. In a different league to this. But the landlord's . . . To say he's *particular* would be putting it mildly.

What area? Simon asks.

Hampstead, the agent says. Well, more like Hendon. But it's really quiet.

Em? Simon calls.

I go back inside. We might as well take a look, I say. We're halfway there now.

The agent nods. I'll stop by the office, he says. See if I can locate the details. It's been a while since I took anyone round, actually. It's not a place that would suit just anyone. But I think it might be right up your street. Sorry, no pun intended.

Now: Jane

‘That’s the last one.’ The estate agent, whose name is Camilla, drums her fingers on the steering wheel of her Smart car. ‘So really, it’s time to make up our minds.’

I sigh. The flat we’ve just viewed, in a run-down mansion block off West End Lane, is the only one in my price range. And I’d just about persuaded myself it was all right – ignoring the peeling wallpaper, the faint smell of someone else’s cooking seeping up from the flat below, the poky bedroom and the mould spattered across the unventilated bathroom – until I’d heard a bell being rung nearby, an old-fashioned handbell, and the place was suddenly filled with the noise of children. Going to the window, I found myself looking down at a school. I could see into a room being used by a toddler group, the windows hung with cut-outs of paper bunnies and geese. Pain tugged at my insides.

‘I think I’ll pass on this one,’ I managed to say.

‘Really?’ Camilla seemed surprised. ‘Is it the school? The previous tenants said they rather liked the sound of children playing.’

‘Though not so much they decided to stay.’ I turned away. ‘Shall we go?’

Now Camilla leaves a long, tactical silence as she drives us back

to her office. Eventually she says, 'If nothing we saw today took your fancy, we might have to think about upping your budget.'

'Unfortunately, my budget can't budge,' I say drily, looking out of the window.

'Then you might have to be a bit less picky,' she says tartly.

'About that last one. There are . . . personal reasons why I can't live next to a school. Not right now.'

I see her eyes going to my stomach, still a little flabby from my pregnancy, and widen as she makes the connection. 'Oh,' she says. Camilla isn't quite as dim as she looks, for which I'm grateful. She doesn't need me to spell it out.

Instead, she seems to come to a decision.

'Look, there is one other place. We're not really meant to show it without the owner's express permission, but occasionally we do anyway. It freaks some people out, but personally I think it's amazing.'

'An amazing property on my budget? We're not talking about a houseboat, are we?'

'God, no. Almost the opposite. A modern building in Hendon. A whole house – only one bedroom, but loads of space. The owner is the architect. He's actually really famous. Do you ever buy clothes at Wanderer?'

'Wanderer . . .' In my previous life, when I had money and a proper, well-paid job, I did sometimes go into the Wanderer shop on Bond Street, a terrifyingly minimalist space where a handful of eye-wateringly expensive dresses were laid out on thick stone slabs like sacrificial virgins, and the sales assistants dressed in black kimonos. 'Occasionally. Why?'

'The Monkford Partnership designs all their stores. He's what

they call a techno-minimalist or something. Lots of hidden gadgetry, but otherwise everything's completely bare.' She shoots me a look. 'I should warn you, some people find his style a bit . . . *austere*.'

'I can cope with that.'

'And . . .'

'Yes?' I prompt, when she doesn't go on.

'It's not a straightforward landlord-tenant agreement,' she says hesitantly.

'Meaning?'

'I think,' she says, flicking down her indicator and moving into the left-hand lane, 'we should take a look at the property first, see if you fall in love with it. Then I'll explain the drawbacks.'

Then: Emma

OK, so the house is extraordinary. Amazing, breathtaking, incredible. Words can't do it justice.

The street outside had given no clue. Two rows of big, nondescript houses, with that familiar Victorian red-brick/sash-window combo you see all over north London, marched up the hill towards Cricklewood like a chain of figures cut from newspaper, each one an exact copy of the next. Only the front doors and the little coloured windows above them were different.

At the end, on the corner, was a fence. Beyond it I could see a low, small construction, a compact cube of pale stone. A few horizontal slits of glass, scattered apparently at random, were the only indication that it really was a house and not some giant paperweight.

Wow, Simon says doubtfully. Is this really it?

Certainly is, the agent says cheerfully. One Folgate Street.

He takes us round the side, where a door is fitted into the wall, perfectly flush. There doesn't seem to be a bell – in fact, I can't see a handle or a letter box either; no nameplate, nothing to indicate human occupation at all.

The agent pushes the door, which swings open.

Who lives here now? I ask.

No one at the moment, he says, standing aside for us to go in. So why wasn't it locked? I say nervously, hanging back.

The agent smirks. It was, he goes. There's a digital key on my smartphone. One app controls everything. All I have to do is switch it from Unoccupied to Occupied. After that, it's all automatic – the house's sensors pick up the code and let me in. If I wear a digital bracelet, I don't even need the phone.

You are *kidding* me, Simon says, awestruck, staring at the door. I almost laugh out loud at his reaction. For Simon, who loves his gadgets, the idea of a house you can control from your phone is like all his best birthday presents rolled into one.

I step into a tiny hall, barely larger than a cupboard. It's too small to stand in comfortably once the agent has followed me, so without waiting to be asked I go on through.

This time it's me who says wow. It really is spectacular. Huge windows, looking on to a tiny garden and a high stone wall, flood the inside with light. It isn't big, but it feels spacious. The walls and floors are all made of the same pale stone. Notches running along the base of each wall give the impression they're floating in the air. And it's *empty*. Not unfurnished – I can see a stone table in a room to one side, some designery-looking, very cool dining chairs, a long, low sofa in a heavy cream fabric – but there's nothing else, nothing for the eye to catch on to. No doors, no cupboards, no pictures, no window frames, no electric sockets that I can see, no light fittings or – I look around, perplexed – even light switches. And although it doesn't feel abandoned or unlive in, there's absolutely no clutter.

Wow, I say again. My voice has an odd, muffled quality. I realise I can't hear anything from the street outside. The ever-present

THE GIRL BEFORE

London background noise of traffic and scaffolding riggers and car alarms has gone.

Most people say that, the agent agrees. Sorry to be a pain, but the landlord insists we remove our shoes. Would you . . . ?

He bends down to unlace his own flashy footwear. We follow suit. And then, as if the stark, bare emptiness of the house has sucked all his patter out of him, he simply pads about in his socks, apparently as dumbstruck as we are, while we look round.

Now: Jane

‘It’s beautiful,’ I say. Inside, the house is as sleek and perfect as an art gallery. ‘Just *beautiful*.’

‘Isn’t it?’ Camilla agrees. She cranes her neck to look up at the bare walls, made of some expensive cream-coloured stone, that soar into the void of the roof. The upper floor is reached by the most crazily minimalist staircase I’ve ever seen. It’s like something hewn into a cliff face: floating steps of open, unpolished stone, with no handrail or visible means of support. ‘No matter how often I come here, it always takes my breath away. The last time was with a group of architecture students – that’s one of the conditions, by the way: you have to open it for visits every six months. But they’re always very respectful. It’s not like owning a stately home and having tourists drop chewing gum on your carpets.’

‘Who lives here now?’

‘No one. It’s been empty almost a year.’

I look across at the next room, if ‘room’ is the right word for a free-flowing space that doesn’t actually have a doorway, let alone a door. On a long stone table is a bowl of tulips, their blood-red blooms a shocking dash of colour against all that pale stone. ‘So where did the flowers come from?’ I go and touch the table. No dust. ‘And who keeps it so clean?’

'A cleaner comes every week from a specialist firm. That's another condition – you have to keep them on. They do the garden, too.'

I walk over to the window, which reaches right to the floor. 'Garden' is also a bit of a misnomer. It's a yard, really – an enclosed space about twenty feet by fifteen, paved with the same stone as the floor I'm standing on. A small oblong of grass, eerily precise and trimmed as short as a bowling green, butts up against the far wall. There are no flowers. In fact, apart from that tiny patch of grass, there's nothing living, no colour of any kind. A few small circles of grey gravel are the only other feature.

Turning back to the interior, it occurs to me that the whole place just needs some colour, some softness. A few rugs, some humanising touches, and it would be really beautiful, like something out of a style magazine. I feel, for the first time in ages, a small flutter of excitement. Has my luck finally changed?

'Well, I suppose that's only reasonable,' I say. 'Is that all?'

Camilla gives a hesitant smile. 'When I say *one* of the conditions, I mean one of the more straightforward ones. Do you know what a restrictive covenant is?'

I shake my head.

'It's a legal condition that's imposed on a property in perpetuity, something that can't be removed even if the house is sold. Usually they're to do with development rights – whether the house can be used as a place of business, that sort of thing. With this house, the conditions are part of the lease agreement, but because they're also restrictive covenants, they can't ever be negotiated or varied. It's an extraordinarily tight contract.'

'What kind of thing are we talking about?'

JP DELANEY

‘Basically, it’s a list of dos and don’ts. Well, don’ts mostly. No alterations of any kind, except by prior agreement. No rugs or carpets. No pictures. No potted plants. No ornaments. No books—’

‘No *books*! That’s ridiculous!’

‘No planting anything in the garden; no curtains—’

‘How do you keep the light out if you can’t have curtains?’

‘The windows are photosensitive. They go dark when the sky does.’

‘So no curtains. Anything else?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Camilla says, ignoring my sarcastic tone. ‘There are about two hundred stipulations in all. But it’s the final one that causes the most problems.’

Then: Emma

... No lights other than those already here, the agent says. No washing lines. No wastepaper baskets. No smoking. No coasters or placemats. No cushions, no knick-knacks, no flat-pack furniture—

That's *mental*, Si says. What gives him the right?

The IKEA furniture in our current flat took him weeks to assemble, and as a result he regards it with the same personal pride as something hewn from trees and carved by his own hand.

I told you it was a tricky one, the agent shrugs.

I'm looking up at the ceiling. Talking of lights, I say, how do you turn them on?

You don't, the agent says. Ultrasonic motion sensors, coupled with a detector that adjusts the level according to how dark it is outside. It's the same technology that makes your car headlights come on at night. Then you just choose the mood you want from the app. Productive, peaceful, playful, and so on. It even adds extra UV in the winter so you don't get depressed. You know, like those SAD lights.

I can see Simon is so impressed by all this that the right of the architect to ban flat-pack furniture is suddenly no longer an issue.

The heating's underfloor, obviously, the agent continues, sensing he's on a roll. But it draws heat from a borehole directly

under the house. And all these windows are triple glazed – the house is so efficient, it actually returns power to the national grid. You'll never pay a fuel bill again.

This is like someone describing porn to Simon. And the security? I say sharply.

All on the same system, the agent says. You can't see it, but there's a burglar alarm built into the outside wall. All the rooms have sensors – the same ones that turn the lights on. And it's smart. It learns who you are and what your usual routine is, but anyone else, it'll check with you to make sure they're authorised.

Em? Simon calls. You have *got* to see this kitchen.

He's wandered into the space to one side, the one with the stone table. At first, I can't even see how he's identified it as a kitchen. A stone counter runs along one wall. At one end is what I suppose could be a tap, a slim steel tube jutting over the stone. A slight depression underneath suggests this might be a sink. At the other end is a row of four small holes. The agent waves his hand over one. Instantly it spouts a fierce, hissing flame.

Ta-da, he goes. The cooker. And actually the architect prefers the word 'refectory' to 'kitchen'. He grins as if to show he realises how stupid this is.

Now that I look more closely, I can see that some of the wall panels have tiny grooves between them. I push one and the stone opens – not with a click, but with an unhurried, pneumatic sigh. Behind it is a very small cupboard.

I'll show you the upstairs, the agent says.

The staircase is a series of open stone slabs, set into the wall. It's not safe for children, obviously, he warns as he leads us up it. Mind how you go.

Let me guess, Simon says. Handrails and stair gates are on the no-no list as well?

And pets, the agent says.

The bedroom is just as sparse as the rest of the house. The bed is built-in – a plinth of pale stone, complete with a rolled-up, futon-style mattress – and the bathroom isn't closed off, just tucked behind another wall. But while the emptiness of the downstairs was dramatic and clinical, up here it feels calm, almost cosy.

It's like a very posh prison cell, Simon comments.

Like I said, it's not to everyone's taste, the agent agrees. But for the right person . . .

Simon presses the wall by the bed and another panel swings open. Inside is a wardrobe. There's barely room for a dozen outfits.

One of the rules is, nothing on the floor at any time, the agent says helpfully. Everything has to be put away.

Simon frowns. How would they even know?

Regular inspections are built into the contract. Plus if any of the rules are broken, the cleaner's obliged to inform the management agency.

No way, Simon says. That's like being back at school. I'm not having someone tell me off for not picking up my dirty shirts.

I realise something: I haven't had a single flashback or panic attack since I stepped inside the house. It's so cut off from the outside world, so *cocooned*, I feel utterly safe. A line from my favourite film floats into my head. *The quietness and the proud look of it. Nothing very bad could happen to you there . . .*

I mean, it's amazing, obviously, Simon goes on. And if it wasn't for all those rules, we'd probably be interested. But we're messy

people. Em's side of the bedroom looks like a bomb went off in French Connection.

Well, in that case, the agent says, nodding.

I like it, I say impulsively.

You do? Simon sounds surprised.

It's different, but . . . it sort of makes sense, doesn't it? If you'd built somewhere like this, somewhere incredible, I can see why you'd want it to be lived in properly, the way you'd meant it to be. Otherwise, what would be the point? And it's fantastic. I've never seen anything like it, not even in magazines. We *could* be tidy, couldn't we, if that's the price for living somewhere like this?

Well – great, Simon says uncertainly.

You like it too? I say.

If you like it, I love it, he goes.

No, I say, but do you really? It would be a big change. I wouldn't want us to do it unless you really wanted to.

The agent's watching us, amused to see how this little domestic turns out. But this is always the way it is with us. I have an idea, and then Simon thinks about it and eventually says yes.

You're right, Em, Simon says slowly. It's much better than anywhere else we're going to get. And if it's a fresh start we want – well, this is a whole lot fresher than if we just moved into another standard one-bed flat, isn't it?

He turns to the agent. So how do we take this further?

Ah, the agent says. That's the tricky bit.