

Thrum

I don't know what time it is. My work alarm hasn't stung me. What's stolen me from a joyless sleep are the evil shits next door: three pre-school brothers arguing over a spinning toy.

When their whines turn to outraged wails, I make a fist and imagine reaching through the plaster, bricks, and mortar of the dividing wall. Forcing my eyes shut, I imagine punching them square in their soft, little mouths so hard that I knock them out their football team bedspreads and out their bedroom window. Then guilt spikes me. Surrendering, I land them on the trampoline in their back garden and imagine glass splinters falling in slow motion all around them like vicious rose petals. Satisfied, I leave the boys trapped behind the high mesh walls of the safety cage and reclaim the darkness for a while longer.

An hour later, the radio alarm crows about a breakdown on the M77; my only route into work. My ablutions start with me screaming into my pillow and 20mg of Citalopram.

The rain-soaked motorway fizzles with rush hour traffic as I exit the M77. I pull into work, aiming for my usual spot; two parking spaces to the left of the zebra crossing at the main entrance. As I'm seconds away from pulling into it, a white Kia sails in ahead of me. I stab the clutch and brake. My service station coffee hurls itself over the edge of the cup. I give the Kia's occupants a vigorous two-fingered salute. They ignore it. So, I give them a predator's red-faced grimace. All incisors are on show as I reverse slowly, rev the engine, and speed forwards into the space immediately next to them. They look now. Shoulders shrug. Arms stretch out, palms up. Lips move. What's my problem? What's your problem?

I trust myself not to void my bowels on their windscreen or slice their tyres with a nail file, but I picture myself doing it.

In the rear mirror, I investigate the ever-deepening lines around my mouth. A dumpy, white-haired woman in a leather jacket exits the Kia; all chunky thighs and tan tights. Her pastel, high-street blouse is about to lose the battle against her overwhelming tits. The driver's far younger than her. The skinny adolescent - probably the daughter - is all ripped jeans with a skunk stripe bleached into her dark hair. God help them and their 'problem areas'.

They lock the Kia and hurry towards Tesco at the opposite end of the shopping centre. I hope they trip over a bush. I imagine them falling; their chins smiling open, their blood spritzing across the wet tarmac like a Jackson Pollock number. Who do the shits think they are? I work here.

The sound of my kitten heels click-clacking across the unnaturally shiny floor of the shopping centre makes me wince. I cringe at my reflection in the glass shop fronts. Checking my watch, I manage a curt, 'Good morning,' to the boy at the pop-up phone accessories stall. I imagine vomiting my bran flakes down his suit jacket. What's he got to be chirpy about? I've knicker stains older than him.

Roll on five thirty.

Lindsay in Electricals forces a smile as I storm into the department store. She's only here until Uni starts, but she knows not to speak to me before lunchtime, especially today.

That's it, blondie. Look away. Line up your toasters and hairdryers. This is as good as your life gets.

I motor on through the rest of the departments, slowing down around Childrenswear. As I swallow the fug of designer perfumes wafting across from Beauty, a white cotton sleepsuit catches my eye. My arms feel heavy, empty. I imagine rocking the tiny thing until a nervous Helena waves at me from Womenswear.

'Hurry up...' she says.

'Coming,' I grunt.

Her red leather handbag doesn't match her shoes.

I picture strangling my high cheek boned colleague until her wheelie-bin-green eyes pop out her head and roll under the sales counter. Then I'd say, 'Helena, sweetie, for a personal shopper, your fashion sense is gash.'

The morning speeds by, thankfully. My hands are full lining up Autumn wardrobes for a pregnant divorcee and a merry widow. They drink fizzy wine and learn about the most stylish cuts and most suitable fabrics for them; how to flatter their curves and amplify their assets, basically.

'Give this a try,' I say.

They pose in the full-length mirrors before rejecting my art with a casual, 'Aye, hen but it's just no me...'

Ungrateful shits.

At lunchtime, I plot my route back to the car for sandwiches and Propranolol. Taking the long route to the store entrance is an option, or I could just brave it and pass Childrenswear again. It would mean passing Dev, the store manager, though. He'll urge me to 'process' and I'll feel the urge to rip off his ears and wear them as a necklace.

So, I tighten my fists and stride past the tiny shoes and designer bibs. 'Mummy's Little Princess' will not beat me, not this year. But soon I'm venturing off the vinyl walkway and invading the carpeted area; weaving between racks until I'm there in front of that damned sleepsuit again. Staring at its terrible, empty feet, my hand reaches out and snatches it from its hanger. I can't stop myself. It's like I'm a passenger in my own brain. I tuck the little sleepsuit into my shirt, keeping it safe against my breast.

When I see Dev, I panic. As usual, he's boring Lindsay in Electricals. He doesn't get that she's not interested in his golf handicap or his bank account. I catch his mouth dropping into a wide 'O' as I run towards the security barriers and set off the alarms.

My ribs ache as I click-clack my kitten heels out of the shopping centre. I stare down every shopper in my path until I reach my Mini. Then, I break.

When Dev taps my window, I'm still nursing the sleepsuit across my shoulder.

'Hannah, let me in...' he says.

There are no sharp edges to his voice, just warm resignation, which is worse. If he'd shouted, got my back up...

I tap the central locking off and allow my ex in.

‘Please don’t...’ I cry, as he installs himself in the passenger seat.

But he stares at me. No bad jokes. No casual remarks. Today, he allows me silence. After ten years, it’s the perfect gift. There’s nothing left for us to obsess, argue, or blame each other over.

After a while, my whole body unclenches. Dev judges it safe to reach out and guide my head onto his shoulder. I allow it, just this once, and promise myself that next year will be different.

‘I feel it too,’ he says, stroking my cheek.

At his kindness, I shove my snotty nose into the cold, lifeless folds of the baby clothes. I hope to feel them fill out with warm, kicking, breathing flesh. My imagination fails.

‘It still hits me,’ I say. ‘No weaning. No potty training. No fighting over make-up and skirt lengths. No birthday parties or graduations.’

‘No first hangover,’ says Dev, trying to help.

‘Yeah...’ I tail off.

Eventually, my heart hardens. I sit up and I’m me again.

‘Get off,’ I bark at Dev.

Dev slopes towards the ‘Staff Only’ area with the sleepsuit protruding from his trouser pocket.

‘Back shortly,’ he says, his shoulders stooped.

I imagine him scrubbing mascara off the baby clothes in the gents while, all-the-while, cursing me for my 'drama'.

He promised to sneak it back onto its little hanger. It'll be like it never happened. Like I dreamt it.

'Hurry,' says Helena, when I return to Womenswear. 'Your last appointment's here...'

'Thanks,' I say, grateful for her not mentioning my lunchtime saga: the screeching alarms, my shoplifter's remorse.

'I covered the rest,' she snaps.

Before I can snap back at her, a hospital memory hits me. A decade ago today, I stood up to use the commode during visiting hour. Something inside me let go. There was this short, hard splashing noise - like ice-cream hitting the pavement - and I looked down. An angry-red mass lay at my bare feet. The contents of my womb were lost forever. Visible to all.

'Here she is,' says Helena, snapping me back into the present.

She hauls the dressing room curtain open. I dig my nails into my palms as she introduces me to the client. Clients. Two women, not one. I bite my cheek to stop myself swearing. Sitting on the dark purple chaise longue, legs crossed and reading magazines, are the parking place gazumpers from this morning: Ms Skunk-head-ripped-jeans and Mrs Squishy-tits McChunky-thighs.

'Good afternoon,' I say, my professionalism straining.

One more hour - that's all it is – and this shitty day will be over.

Word Count: 1,490 words