

There

was once a man who, one night between the main course and the sweet at a dinner party, went upstairs and locked himself in one of the bedrooms of the house of the people who were giving the dinner party.

There was once a woman who had met this man thirty years before, had known him slightly for roughly two weeks in the middle of a summer when they were both seventeen, and hadn't seen him since, though they'd occasionally, for a few years after, exchanged Christmas cards, that kind of thing.

Right now the woman, whose name was Anna, was standing outside the locked bedroom door behind which the man, whose name was Miles, theoretically was. She had her arm raised and her

hand ready to – to what? Tap? Knock discreetly? This beautiful, perfectly done-out, perfectly dulled house would not stand for noise; every creak was an affront to it, and the woman who owned it, emanating disapproval, was just two feet behind her. But it was her fist she was standing there holding up, like a 1980s cliché of a revolutionary, ready to, well, nothing quiet. Batter. Beat. Pound. Rain blows.

Strange phrase, to rain blows. Somewhere over the rainblow. She didn't remember much about him, but they'd never have been friends in the first place if he wasn't the sort to enjoy a bad pun. Was he, unlike Anna right now, the kind of person who'd know what to say to a shut door if he were standing outside one trying to get someone on the other side to open it? The kind who could turn to that child stretched on her front as far up the staircase as her whole small self would go, the toes of her bare feet on the wood of the downstairs hall floor and her chin in her hands on the fifth step lying there watching, and straight off be making the right kind of joke, *what do you call two mushrooms on holiday? Fun guys*, straight off be holding forth about things like where a phrase like *to rain blows* came from in the first place?

The woman standing behind Anna sighed. She somehow made a sigh sound cavernous. After it the

silence was even louder. Anna cleared her throat.

Miles, she said to the wood of the door. Are you there?

But the bleat of her voice left her somehow less there herself. Ah, now, see – that’s what it took, the good inappropriateness of that child. Half boy, all girl, she’d elbowed herself up off the staircase, run up the stairs and was about to hammer on the door.

Bang bang bang.

Anna felt each thud go through her as if the child were hammering her on the chest.

Come out come out wherever you are, the child yelled.

Nothing happened.

Open sesame, the child yelled.

She had ducked under Anna’s arm to knock. She looked up at her from under her arm.

It makes the rock in the side of the mountain open, the child said. They say it in the story, therefore the rock just like opens.

The child put her mouth to the door and spoke again, this time without shouting.

Knock knock, she said. Who’s there?

Who’s there?

There were several reasons at that particular time in Anna Hardie’s life for her wondering what it meant, herself, to be *there*.

One was her job, which she had just given up, in what she and her colleagues laughingly called Senior Liaison, at what she and her colleagues only half-laughingly called the Centre for Temporary Permanence (or, interchangeably, the Centre for Permanent Temporariness).

Another was that Anna had woken up a couple of weeks ago in the middle of her forties in the middle of the night, from a dream in which she saw her own heart behind its ribcage. It was having great trouble beating because it was heavily crusted over with a caul made of what looked like the stuff we clean out of the corners of our eyes in the mornings when we wake up. She woke up, sat up and put her hand on her heart. Then she got up, went to the bathroom mirror and looked. There she was.

The phrase reminded her of something Denny at the Evening News, with whom she'd worked on neighbourhood liaison pieces and with whom she'd had a short liaison herself, had told her some time ago, on their second and last lunchtime. He was a sweet man, Denny. He'd stood in front of her in her kitchen, their first time, and presented his penis to her very sweetly, rueful and hopeful both, a little apologetic about his erection and at the same time proud of it; she liked this. She liked him. But two lunchtimes was all it was, and they both knew it.

Denny had a wife, her name was Sheila, and their two girls and their boy were at Clemont High. Anna made a pot of tea, put sugar and milk on the tray because she wasn't sure what he took, carried it upstairs, slid back into the bed. It was a quarter past one. They had just under half an hour left. He'd asked could he smoke. She'd said, okay, since it's the last lunch. He'd smiled. Then he'd turned over in the bed, lit the cigarette, changed the subject. He'd said did she know he could sum up the last six decades of journalism in six words?

Go on then, she said.

I was there. There I was, he said.

It was a commonplace, he said. By the middle of the twentieth century every important report put it like this: *I was there*. Nowadays: *There I was*.

Soon it would be seven words, Anna said. The new century had already added a seventh word. *There I was, guys*. She and Denny had laughed, drunk their tea, put their clothes back on and gone back to their different jobs. The last time they'd spoken was some months ago, about how to handle the story with the local kids giving urine to the asylum kids in lemonade bottles to drink.

In the middle of the night, some months later, holding her own heart, feeling nothing, Anna had looked at herself in the mirror in the bathroom. There she was. It was the there-she-was guise.

There she was again, then, two evenings ago, sitting in front of her laptop one summer evening with the noise of Wimbledon coming from neighbours' TVs through the open windows of the houses all around. Wimbledon was on her own TV too. Her own TV's sound was turned down. It was sunny in London and the Wimbledon grass was still bright green, only a little scuffed. The TV screen flickered away by itself beyond the laptop screen. Pock noises and oohs and ahs, strangely disconnected from their source, accompanied the little noises she was making on her keyboard. It was as if the whole outside world was TV soundtrack. Maybe there was a new psychosis, Tennis Players' Psychosis (TPP), where you went through life believing that an audience was always watching you, profoundly moved by your every move, reacting round your every reaction, your every momentous moment, with joy / excitement / disappointment / Schadenfreude. Presumably all professional tennis players had something like it, and maybe so to some extent did everybody who still believed in God. But would this mean that people who *didn't* have it were somehow less *there* in the world, or at least differently there, because they felt themselves less observed? We might as well pray to the god of tennis players, she thought. We might as well ask *that* god as ask any other for

world peace, to keep us safe, to bring all the birds that've ever died, ever sunk into dust via little mounds of feather and crumbling hollow little bones, back to life, perch them all on that sill right now, the small ones at the front and the large ones at the back, and have them sing a rousing chorus of Bye Bye Blackbird, which was a song her father used to whistle when she was a little girl, and one she hadn't heard for many years. No one here to love or understand me. Oh what hard-luck stories they all hand me. Was that it? Something about hard-luck stories, anyway. Just as she was about to look the lyrics up on the net new mail came pingping into her inbox with an electronic little trill.

The new mail was quite a long email which Anna nearly mistook for the please-transfer-money-to-this-account-because-I-am-dying-and-need-your-help kind. But she paused her finger above delete when something about it caught her eye. It was addressed to her with the correct first name but the wrong surname initial. *Dear Anna K.* It was both her and not her, the name. More: something about it made her feel super-eighted, instamaticked. It gave her a feeling something like the word summer used to. Most of all it reminded her of an old spinebent copy of a Penguin classic paperback by Kafka, yes, Franz Kafka, which she had read one summer when she was sixteen or seventeen.

Dear Anna K

I am writing to you because my husband and I are at the end of my tether and we are hoping to God that you will be able to help us.

Ten days ago we invited Miles Garth, who I believe you know to dinner here at our house in Greenwich. He is a friend of a friend, we actually hardly know him which is why this situation is so difficult and actually untenable as you can imagine. To cut a long short story Mr Garth has locked himself in our spare bedroom. I am only relieved the bedroom is ensuite. He will not leave the room. He is not just refusing to unlock the door and go to his own home, wherever that might be. He is refusing to speak to a single soul. It has now been ten days, and our unwanted tenant has only communicated by 1 piece of paper slipped under the bottom of the door. We are slipping flat packs of wafer-paper-thin turkey and ham to him under the said door but are unable to provide him with anything more dimensional because of the size of the space between the said door and the floor. (Our spare room door, in fact all the upstairs doors in our house are believed 18th century although the house itself dates from the 1820s you can understand my concern and the hinges are on the inside side. I have reason to believe he has jammed one of our chairs under the c18th door handle too.).

I/we have absolutely no idea whatsoever why Mr Garth has chosen to barricade himself into our house, it is certainly nothing to do with me and it is nothing to do with my husband or my daughter. As you can imagine ten days is a long time at the end of the day. We have tried his work associates but nothing has worked.

We do not however wish to be unpleasant. We are at present

using a softly-softly approach, also on the advice of the police advisers.

This is why I/we are contacting you as one of the few Significant others we can trace for Mr Garth. We were fortunate to find this email for you in the address book in his phone which he did not take into our spare room with him but left with his jacket and his car keys in our lounge.

We have moved his car temporarily to the driveway of a friend but it cannot stay there indefinitely (it was originally left I'm afraid illegally in a Residents Permit Space.).

If you can help my husband and myself at all in any way I/we would be very grateful. Our telephone number is at the bottom of this email. I would be very much obliged if you would contact us as soon as possible even if it is only to let me know that you have received this message even if you can't actually help in this instance.

Very many thanks indeed and I/we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Gen Lee

(Genevieve and Eric Lee)

Who was Miles Garth, again?

Miles.

Yes.

When we went to Europe.

Anna read it through again.

He is refusing to speak to a singe soul.

Later that evening she found that instead of thinking (as she did every night as the dark came down and every morning as the light came up)

about work, and about the faces, one after the other, of the people she had failed, she was preoccupied with this notion, a lightly burnt soul, its scent of singed wool.

Before she went to bed she tapped out the following, and sent it.

Dear Mrs Lee,

Thank you for your email. What a strange predicament. I'm afraid though that you might be on to a wild goose chase with me, since I don't really know Miles Garth or anything about him, having met him only very briefly and quite a long time ago now, back in the 1980s. I am not at all sure I can help you. But if you think I can, I'm willing to give it a try. What would you like me to do?

All my best,

Anna Hardie.

Now it was two days later.

Miles, she said to whoever was behind the door.
Are you there?

Where exactly was Anna, then, who had travelled in on the packed train that morning next to a man in a Gore-Tex jacket who was watching porn on the screen of his phone? She'd crossed the capital past the posters on the tube station walls advertising *This Season's Atonement* and under the ads in the tube carriage with the picture of the kitchen bin with the speech bubble coming out of its mouth saying *It's My Right To Eat Tin Cans* and the words beneath which

said *Deny Your Bin Its Rights*. She'd gone for a walk between stations and seen St Paul's rise to the surface on the riverbank like a piece of old cartilage. She'd ridden a train through a place that looked like the future had looked when she was a child. Now she was walking up a hot summer street of beautiful buildings and shabby-chic houses trying to remember what Greenwich meant again, which was something to do with time. When she got to the right address, a child wearing a bright yellow dress over the top of a pair of jeans was sitting on its top step picking little stones out of a fancy border of pebbles at each side of the door. She was whistling a repetitive strip of tune a bit like the Judy Garland song from *The Wizard of Oz* and throwing the stones at a drain in the road, presumably trying to get them down the grate of it. The drain cover and the road around it were dotted with little white stones.

Hello, Anna said.

I'm broke, the child said.

Me too, Anna said.

Really? the child said.

Yes, Anna said. Almost totally. What a coincidence. Aren't you hot in all those clothes?

Nope, the child said reaching up to the doorbell. Because I feel that I am not doing myself full justice if I don't wear them all.

But it was a white woman, dressed in summer

whites and beiges, who answered the door. She pushed the child to one side and held her hand out to shake Anna's hand.

Genevieve Lee, she said. Call me Gen. Thank you so much for coming.

She led Anna into the lounge, still holding her by the hand. When she let go Anna folded her jacket and put it on the arm of the couch, but Genevieve Lee stared at the jacket there for an unnaturally long time.

I'm sorry. It makes me afraid, Genevieve Lee said.

My jacket does? Anna said.

I now have a horrible fear that people who take their coats off in my house might never leave my house, Genevieve Lee said.

Anna picked her jacket up at once.

I'm so sorry, she said.

No, it's fine, you can leave it there for now, Genevieve Lee said. But as you can tell. We really are at the end of our tether with your friend Miles.

Yes, well, as I said, he's not really my friend, Anna said.

I promise you, we can't take much more of our oh you tea, Genevieve Lee said.

Sorry? Anna said.

Our Unwanted Tenant, she said.

Oh, I see, Anna said.

No. Oh you tea, Genevieve Lee said.

No, I meant –, Anna said.

Also, oh you tea spells out, Genevieve Lee said, which makes it what Eric, my husband, and I call a positive thinking exercise.

Genevieve Lee was currently a freelance Personnel Welfare Coordinator for people who worked in Canary Wharf. When they had problems, financial, emotional or practical, their companies could contact her and she'd tell them what kind of help was available in both the public and the private sectors.

As you can imagine, work's been off the scale recently, she said. What are you currently doing yourself?

I'm currently unemployed, Anna said.

I can help you with that, Genevieve Lee said. The main thing is, it's very, very important to talk about it. Here's my card. What's your field?

Senior Liaison, Anna said. But I've just given it up.

Gosh, given it up, Genevieve Lee said.

Presumably something better on the horizon.

There'd better be, Anna said, or I may kill myself.

Genevieve Lee laughed a knowing laugh.

She told Anna that Eric worked at the Institute for Measurement and Control and that he'd be back at three.

The child, who'd followed them in, was sitting in the retro-modern armchair at the window, batting her bare heels off the front of the chair.