

Chapter 1

Mr Harding's face turns from pink, to crimson, to purple. He appears to be metamorphosing into a bunch of grapes: boils pop out of his cheeks, nose and forehead until his eyes and mouth are no longer visible. He starts to clutch at the collar of his paisley pyjama shirt, wheezing and gasping for breath. A pair of concerned nurses rush in from stage left and right to assist, each wielding EpiPens. The dome of Mr Harding's head is now inflating like a balloon.

"Look what you've done," hisses the nurse on the right.

"Poisoner," spits the left, glaring at Con with Old Testament cholera.

"Blue to the sky, orange to the thigh!" Comes the battle cry from the right.

But at the last moment, they both adjust their aim at the patient's crown, which has swollen to such an extent, they have to climb up onto the bed to reach. On impact Mr Harding's head bursts in a scarlet explosion of cerebral matter. One of the nurses scoops up a handful of motor cortex from the bed and tosses it at Con. Bullseye. It slaps her in the face, warm, wet and sticky.

"If YOU had half a brain –" the nurse fulminates.

"You'd have read the fucking notes!" The second nurse scathes, removing the clipboard from the foot of the bed and thrusting it into Con's face, with such force that she –

Wakes up. With a sharp intake of breath and a small yelp. "Mr Harding! Poor Mr Harding," she sobs.

O not this again. Heathcliffe is a hound of notable sensibilities. But he's warm and comfortable and it's raining outside.

He clambers up the bed and onto Con's chest, licking away at her tears.

"Heatcliffe," she strains under his weight. A lurcher is a formidable bedfellow; an elbow or paw in the wrong place can leave bruises that take weeks to heal.

Go back to sleep. Please go back to sleep. Do not turn on the lamp. Do not pick up the book. Do not put on your specs. Lick, lick, lick. See, it was just a bad dream. You're OK. Mr What's-his-face didn't get chased and eaten by wolves, or lions, or –"

"Oh, it's no use," Con, reaches for the lamp switch and throws the small bedroom into a chiaroscuro of light and shade. In daylight hours, the room has a quaint cottage-like charm; being so tiny and yet so busy with trinkets and candles and picture frames and rugs and cushions and all manner of other kitsch. Since her

withdrawal from the land of daylight, Con feels the need to pad out her environment. She exists in a fortress of soft furnished denial. But in this light, it's perfectly monstrous.

No use? You didn't even try. What was that? Like 30 seconds?

She reaches for her reading glasses and picks up the battered copy of Wuthering Heights. Where were we, Heathcliffe?

The bit where the dog bites her. Heathcliff retreats to the bottom of the bed, sitting on Con's feet with his back to the glaring lamp light. He must have heard the story dozens of times; but even a savage beast, descended from wolves, cannot deny the eloquent prose of Mistress Bronte. *I'm all ears.* He curls up, nuzzling at the bedclothes.

Con clears her throat and begins reading, "I got a stone and thrust it between his jaws, and tried with all my might to cram it down his throat." O yes, I remember, Skulker's game.

Didn't I just say? The bit where the dog bites her?

"Close your ears boy." Con whispers. She reads to the end of the chapter, but her heart's just not in it. Those nurses have really rattled her. And the bull-dog's purple tongue is hardly an image to calm a ravaged mind. Those nurses. Who were they? No one she remembers ever working with. It's usually Mr Harding himself that laces her dreams with vitriol. Or occasionally a close relative. Someone who was there, visiting that day. The granddaughter features most often: her perfectly sweet and innocent features morphing into the contorted mask of a demon, spitting out diatribes of the most unwholesome filth. Con wonders how the mind finds such ways to conspire against its owner. These nurses were conjured by her own imagination. Then she remembers how she deserves so much worse. Deserves to be languishing in a cell, like the tortured souls in tragi-dramas. Except that in tragi-drama humanity turns its back unjustly on the tragi-heroes. She can hardly compare to the likes of Jean Valjean or Edmond Dante or Henri Charriere or Andy Dufresne. Such beautiful names for men subjected to such ugliness. Why were the wrongly incarcerated always men, she wonders? Because as a society we cannot imagine the female spirit strong enough to survive such abject brutality? But then Catherine, in her own way, is incarcerated, isn't she?

"Shall we have a brew?" She asks.

Heathcliffe groans. The 'we' implies that he will enjoy his own saucer of tea, but he knows not to get his hopes up. Once, when he first moved in, she had treated him - it

was sweeter and stronger than Jimbo's cuppas – he'd lapped it up. Perhaps a little too enthusiastically. This new two-legger didn't like mess, it seemed.

Con swings round her legs and fumbles around for her slippers. She potters across to the window and peers out. "Clear night boy."

No. I do not want to go 'walkies' thank you very much. I'm comfortable here. You go on without me - I'll keep the bed warm for you.

She poddles out and heads into the galley kitchen, the flap, flap of her slippers resonating through the caravan's open plan chambers. "A nice brew should do the trick," she tells herself, in a routine she performs nightly. As she waits for the kettle, she puts the teabag and sugar in her cup and gets the milk from the fridge. Putting it back she notices there are no eggs left. This is a rare opportunity to clean the egg tray. And once she's done that, she moves on to the cheese compartment and the sauce bottle compartment. And then, well, can't leave a job part finished, can she? Out comes the salad drawer and the entire contents of the tiny little fridge: tub of marg, half a dozen yoghurts, a fish cake wrapped in tin foil she's forgotten about after eating its mate, half a tin of beans, fruit loaf, marmalade. Out come the shelves. In the sink they go, with a good squirt of bleach. She's kneeling on the floor, head inside with the squirty lemony cleaner in one hand and a cloth in other when Heathcliffe appears. He might be able to resist the empty promise of tea, but the movement of all this food? Must be something in the offing, surely.

"Hello boy," she offers her face for a lick, her hands being otherwise occupied.

Not what I had in mind. He patters over to his water dish and laps at the surface disinterestedly.

"That tea will have to wait; we're out of eggs, boy," she tells him. She rarely eats eggs. This last batch was down to a midnight craving weeks ago. For eggy bread. Which in the end she didn't indulge. She was averse to frying anything. Because of the smell. So many things she denied herself: bacon, kippers, fried eggs and chips.

"Let's see what else we need." She starts opening cupboard doors and noting down anything that's running short. She goes to put the list in her pocket and realises she's still in her nightshirt. "Lord! I'd do well turning up at Asda like this, wouldn't I?" She heads for the bedroom to change. This is a journey of perhaps twenty feet, but it feels more like a Trans Pennine hike to her exhausted limbs. Any movement in this nocturnal existence is slow and arduous; it's as if the darkness was actual, physical matter that filled up the van. A kind of gloopy soup she must trawl through. She is a night walker, in weighty diving equipment, wading across the bottom of a deep ocean bed.

She changes into yesterday's T-shirt and her cycling leggings and heads for the door; another gruelling odyssey. Now what did she do with that list? She's left it in the bedroom. Back she goes. Heathcliffe watches from the armchair, where he's curled up. *You've forgotten your socks again*, he observes with a sigh as she walks past him a second time. She gives him a pat on the head, "be good boy, I won't be long, just off to Asda for some bits."

At the door she grabs her jacket and puts the list in her pocket, "don't forget that," she pats the pocket pleased with her progress. She puts on her rucksack and goes for her trainers. "Socks! Forgot me socks," she looks back towards the bedroom. Back she goes again. She rummages in the laundry basket for a pair that aren't rain sodden; no point putting clean socks on just for a trip to Asda.

Eventually she makes it outside. She locks up the van and scans the neighbouring plots. All the other vans are in total darkness, there's just the yellow pools of light created by the miniature, ornate streetlamps dotted about the park to see by. She nods her head, satisfied it's safe to proceed. She unlocks her tiny shed, which resembles a child's Wendy House, and wheels out her bicycle. And it is very much a bicycle; not a bike. Her father would have called it a 'sit up and beg'; and he'd be all for her choice of make: Dawes. As a toddler she had watched, fascinated, as he assembled his six-speed racer from scratch. It's all mountain bikes and hybrids now, isn't it? With their suspension and hydraulic brakes. Well, no thank you, not for Con. She's happy with her armchair seat and her mudguards and her parcel rack and her kickstand. She deploys this while she 'locks up' the shed (she actually just hooks the padlock onto the closed latch since it's so late and there's little else to take from the shed other than the mower and who would be wanting off with a tired old mower at midnight in these parts?)

And she's off. Through the park, onto the main road. Although these night shopping expeditions have become a regular, almost day-to-day (well, night-to-night) fixture, there's still that little thrill. The sense of escape, freedom, release. The miasma of life in the van is lifted; she can breathe; her limbs move freely. She gains momentum, pushing up the hills easily, coasting down them, cornering deftly. The absence of cars allows her to sail through red lights and cross roundabouts with barely a passing glance to her right. She makes it in half the time it would take her during rush hour.

Locking her bicycle up outside the store, the sense of freedom is quickly overshadowed by paranoia. The imminent prospect of human contact does more to raise her heart rate than the two-mile stint she just completed. Inside it's worse. Every aisle is manned by a green uniformed shelf stacker, busily topping up supplies for the hordes of customers daylight will bring. They regard the average midnight

shopper with mild disdain. Don't they know this is *their* time? Stocks have to be replenished; and when is this ever supposed to happen if people don't observe the basic unwritten rule that the small hours are set aside for this very thing? But the likes of Con? *This* woman that makes an actual habit of turning up with an actual *list* and *fills* her basket? This is not some middle of the night emergency – a teething toddler or a sleepless, anxious teenager.

Con makes her way through her list as quickly as she can. She works her way from top to bottom, picking up items in the order she has them written down. Even if she sees something she knows she needs, she walks past. She'll come back to it. That way she knows nothing will get missed. It has occurred to her that she should try to group her list, so that items that are next to each other in store are written on the same line. But somehow in the van, she just cannot visualise which aisles are where. Besides, they're always moving stuff around. Like now, she's sure the peanut butter was across from the meat freezers last time. Now it's wash powders. Someone once said that the big supermarkets do this deliberately, to make customers walk down every aisle, tempting them into making purchases they don't really need. Who was that? Probably the same person that told her about the absence of clocks. So we lose track of time. Of reality.

She turns a corner and is confronted by a giant cleaning machine. It's operative is actually riding it. It reminds her of the sit-on lawn mowers driven by smug business executives on the handful of Sunday's in the year when a) they're not jet-setting or mini-breaking b) the sun is shining and c) the gardener needs to be put back in his place. The driver keeps coming, *go on, turn down this aisle, I dare you.*

Con averts her eyes and circles round the next aisle and back round. Just in time to see the floor wash mobile pulling into the adjacent lane. There's the peanut butter. About half-way down. But the floor is wet. She hates to do it, but –

The machine starts bleeping; a small red light on the back flashes. The driver reverses and turns back up the aisle. Well, if she's coming back up anyway. Might as well walk on it. Con makes her way tentatively towards the jams and spreads. Eyes fixed on the soapy spinning brushes. But just as she's ready to grab and retreat – there's no smooth in her brand. This is one of the many hazards of shopping in irregular hours. If there's something they don't have, she's stuffed. She can't just shrug and think, 'I'll pick one up from Tesco or Sainsbury's'. This is her only source of sustenance. Sometimes it feels like a post-apocalyptic hunt for supplies and provisions; just getting a few days shop. To add insult to injury, they've filled up the smooth slot with crunchy.

Her paralysis is broken by the sudden proximity of the cleaning machine. She lets out a little yelp and starts to back up. She literally moonwalks as fast as the wet floor will allow to the top of the aisle, the buffer closing on her with every back-stride. And proceeds to the checkouts. Ordinarily, she would wait for the all clear and then go back to the jams and spreads to consider her options. But what's the point? She knows that she would just stand there, hoping against hope to spot one single solitary jar that's been mis-shelved. She would then pick up and put back down every other choice, before taking the crunchy and ditching it two aisles down. Whoever it was that made the observations about supermarkets strategically moving products and messing with our sense of time and reality, they really should theorise on the excess of choices and the debilitating effect on, particularly indecisive, consumers. If there was only one brand of everything – how much simpler life would be.

Outside she closes her eyes and takes in the night air, before unlocking her bicycle and making the journey back to the caravan. Back to Heathcliffe. Back to her underwater lair.

"I'm back boy!" She announces, placing her rucksack carefully down and removing her coat and shoes.

Best have a look I suppose, Heathcliffe groans. He places his front paws down on the floor and walks them forwards, stretching his back legs.

"Watch the eggs!" Con tells him, as he comes for a sniff in the bag. "Get your nose out." She puts away all her purchases and returns to her tea making. Heathcliffe returns to his chair, disappointed.

"Are you sulking now?" She asks, sitting down at the little Formica table. "What's this?" She holds up a Custard Cream.

Heathcliffe's chin remains firmly planted on the edge of the armchair, but his eyebrows almost leap off his head.

"Come on," she pats the sofa bench next to her.

Oh go on then, I am quite peckish, he yawns and stretches off the chair again.

"We'll just have this then we'll go for a nice walk. It's a nice night for it." Con tells him.

I'll tell you what it's a nice night for, Heathcliffe takes the biscuit back to his warm, cosy chair, *it's a nice night for dozing in the chair, or better yet, sleeping on the bed.*

Ten minutes later and she's dangling the lead in his face, "come on lazybones."

I'm alright ta. I'll just stay here. You go on without me. Knock yourself out. But she's clipping on the lead now.

"See, told you it was a nice night, didn't I?" She repeats as they wander through the park.

Who are you trying to convince? Heathcliffe amuses himself by watering Mrs Hibbertson's plant pot men.

Con nervously keeps an eye out for any signs of Mrs Hibbertson stirring. "Come on boy, can't you wait a minute?"

*Well, I **could** wait till morning, I **could**.*

Con pauses at the edge of the park, next to the sign that reads: Daybreak Caravan Village. A name that has taken on fresh irony in recent months. "Up hill, or down dale, boy?"

Literally could not care less.

Despite her apparent chirpiness, Con has in fact lost much of her enthusiasm for dog walks since becoming a night owl. She misses dawn walks – in her opinion the very best time of the day. Watching the sun come up over the top of the pit tip with your drawn-out shadow beside you, birdsong for soundtrack, just sets you up for the day somehow. Nowadays she doesn't see the light of day until at least ten. The problem with night walks is they are so limiting. Can't go in the woods. Can't go across the pit tips. Can't go through the farmer's fields. Can't go down by the river. Most of the local parks are ruled out. Of course, she could illuminate their path by torchlight, but there's something about only being able to see two feet in front of her that makes her feel almost as anxious as walking in broad daylight. So, here they are, about to trudge up the hill and round the new estate again. It's that or go down the hill, and round the old estate. Either way, the main road is unavoidable.