

Prologue

On the last day the two of them sat at a table inside a small wooden shelter. Wind cut through the gaps in the beams, and the rise and fall of it made conversation difficult. Outside was dust, and the skeletons of trees. Some of the others wondered what they were doing in there, some suspected, most had their own concerns.

The woman, heavily pregnant, put some soil on the table, separated it into two piles, and added a small scattering of bone fragments to each. She carefully unfolded a small cloth, took out a simple ring and put it in front of her. The man ran his hands through his thinning hair and raked his fingernails through his beard. He was malnourished, dressed in several layers of clothing under a thick, patchy coat.

“Do you have them?” asked the woman.

He reached inside the coat and took out a metal flask and a bracelet.

“We could sell that and eat for a week,” he said, nodding towards the flask. “Will this actually work?”

She picked up the flask, unscrewed the top, and looked in.

“It’s pristine,” he said, “and it was not easy to get.”

She nodded and put it on the table. “I believe it will work,” she said. “Others have done it.”

“Not others you’ve met, though.”

She inhaled deeply. “Not others that I’ve met. No.”

The man gestured towards her stomach. “You’re leaving it late.”

“I took some time to think about it.”

“If I’d known I’d have done it years ago,” he said, scratching his head again. She added the bracelet to the mixture in front of him, and the ring to her own and opened the

flask. The man turned his head away as she poured clean water across the table. She held out a knife to him.

“Oh, I’m going first?” he said.

She closed her eyes briefly and took back the offering. She drew the knife across her left palm. Blood welled up and she dripped it onto the wet mixture sitting in front of her. She put the knife down between them. He quickly picked it up, wiped it on his coat, and did the same.

“Say your piece,” she said.

The man lowered his head to the table and murmured to himself as the sound of the wind took it away from her ears. Then he looked up.

“And you?”

She nodded and did the same, and then they locked eyes again. The man’s hands were on the table and he started to look around.

“Is that it? Did it work?” He paused for a second. “Will it hurt?”

“I haven’t witnessed one,” said the woman, “but it should be no more than minutes.”

“Is there any water left?” asked the man.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Can I bandage my hand?”

“Do you understand what you’re doing? It doesn’t matter.”

They sat in silence.

“What if it doesn’t work?”

She didn’t reply.

“I don’t think it worked. I have to go back. Is there any water left?”

She looked at him and opened her mouth to speak.

#

April 8, 2020

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“It’s all dry and sticky at the moment in the land of cervical mucus,” said Lisa, “and the basal thermometer says no change. We could have sex tonight if you like, but it would really be pointless.”

“You’re for sure muted there, right?” said Tom.

Lisa glanced down at her laptop.

“I’m muted, but if anyone on this call can lipread, they’re getting all of our sensitive information. Are you?”

“I’m not even in a call,” said Tom. “I’ve just been talking to myself to try and make sense of these numbers. Daydreaming about things like going to the pub.”

“You can have your government-sanctioned unit of exercise,” said Lisa.

“Maybe it’s a good thing you’re dry and oily,” said Tom.

“Sticky,” she interrupted.

“Sticky and oily,” she rolled her eyes, “because it’s not really optimal baby-having conditions right this minute.”

“Disagree,” said Lisa. “Anyone I know who’s had a baby has gone into a year-long, self-imposed lockdown anyway, so we may as well get it done now with everyone else.”

“On the other hand, you’d have to go to the hospital in a hazmat suit and the midwife would have to tell you to push over Zoom. You know those things they use for handling radioactive materials? The box with the gloves built into it? That will be our child’s first sight. He’ll have a glove fetish.”

“We have, at any given moment, at least nine months left. We’re not going to be using the glove box next year I can only presume.”

She closed her laptop and moved from the tiny desk to the small couch, in the process stepping over Tom, who was sitting on the floor because they owned one chair. They were easing into the third week of existing completely in two rooms; the boundaries between work and home, between night and day, had gotten porous. They both obsessively scrolled through the news and absorbed none of it. They had never successfully sat through an entire government briefing. Consumption of tea had skyrocketed. They realised that the nation, the world, was in a historic crisis but on the local level, in this extremely small flat, the main symptom was a crushing, relentless boredom.

Then a loud, clear voice in the room said YOU.

Tom jumped immediately from the floor to standing and turned towards the radiator. Lisa gathered her legs into herself and backed towards the other side of the couch.

“What the fuck was that?” asked Tom.

“You?” said Lisa. “Was that from downstairs? Who’s you?”

Tom edged cautiously past the desk, and on to wall with the radiator, where the sound seemed to have emerged from. There were no enclosed spaces in the room. Nowhere for anywhere to hide. Nothing out of place. No more words.

“Did it come through the pipes?” asked Tom, taking a pen and tapping them lightly as if he didn’t want to touch them with his bare hand.

“My heart is racing,” said Lisa. “That was in the room.”

“There’s nothing in the room,” said Tom. “You and I barely fit in here.”

Lisa walked the perimeter with her hand on the wall, glancing behind the couch, under the desk, into the tangle of wires behind the TV.

“What are you looking for?” asked Tom.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “something. The TV is off. We don’t own a radio because it’s not 1993.”

“Someone on your call?”

“My computer speakers are nowhere near that good. That would be an even bigger mystery.”

She continued poking around the room, reaching up towards the low ceiling and tapping the lightbulb so that it swayed back and forth a little.

“I’m going to do something that you shouldn’t do if you’re in a movie,” she said.

“If it’s anything other than staying in this room then I think it’s illegal.”

“No, here it is, are you ready: HELLO?”

Nothing happened.

“Was that it?” asked Tom.

She sat down, more disappointed than she actually expected to be.

“Yeah that was it. I think my investigation is complete.”

“I may not have thoroughly examined the radiator. It might have voice particles. Ectoplasm. Heat noises,” said Tom, scratching his shoulder.

“You know what, sure, let’s check it out.”

Lisa slid off the couch and crawled over to the radiator. She took the pen out of Tom’s hand and tapped on the pipes as well. She put her ear up close to it and ran her hand across the skirting board as if lightly dusting it.

“There isn’t any...”

“Ssshhh,” she said, waving her other hand up in the air. “There might be something, you know.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Tom, unmoving.

“It might be, I don’t know, humming or talking from very far away,” she said, almost into the floor. She beckoned him down with her hand. He made a show of exhaling on the way down, this was supposed to be done by now, and crawled over to her. For ten or fifteen seconds, they stayed crouched in that position, silently, as if praying to the appliance. Tom then pulled back into a sitting position and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Did you hear it?” said Lisa. “It might be gone.”

“I didn’t hear anything special. Radiators make noise. Pipes do things.”

“This one shouted YOU at us. Which one of us is you?”

Tom did not respond to this.

“It might happen again,” said Lisa.

“I’m getting less and less convinced it even happened the first time,” said Tom. “Was it someone shouting from outside? Are you going to have your next work call from under the radiator?”

“It was in the room,” said Lisa.

“Well I’m going to,” Tom glanced round the room, “go back to work I guess? It’s that or watch TV.”

Lisa pulled herself up to sitting as well. “It was weird,” she said.

“I will acknowledge that it was weird,” said Tom.

“What if you’re YOU. Wouldn’t you want to know?”

“No, I’m me,” said Tom. “Must have been talking about you.”

Lisa’s eyes glanced at him for no more than half a second but he could see the combination of weary resignation and amusement that told him the spell had been broken. He wasn’t going to pursue it and she had nothing to work with. She would be thinking about it

all night but he knew they'd have the TV on in the next fifteen minutes, and, if nothing else happened, this would be a small anecdote from the first weeks of lockdown.

“You're dry and sticky and cold then,” he said. “Game off for tonight.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You can slouch around the flat wasting your life and then go to bed either far too early or extremely late.”

“Result,” said Tom, heaving himself onto the couch, his phone having materialised in his hand.

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April 17, 2020

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Nine days later, the voice said LAST.

Tom tripped on a step as he burst into the room; Lisa stood up suddenly and cracked her knee hard against the desk, tipping over her laptop and sending globs of tea onto the wall behind. Tom picked himself up and stood frozen in the middle of the room, posed like he should be in motion but unable to figure out which way to go. Lisa's hand tentatively reached into the air around her head and swirled around as if she'd be able to physically feel the after effects of the sound.

She looked over her shoulder at Tom, eyes narrow. Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

“Last,” she said.

“OK,” said Tom.

“You heard it, where did it come from this time?”

“Outside? I wasn't even in the room.”

“We should call someone about this.”

“And say what,” said Tom, “please help us, we heard a voice in the living room.”

“Stop.”

“I wasn’t even in the room.”

“So you said. But you moved so quickly you were in here before that single, individual word had finished.”

“Yes. I heard something. I don’t know where it came from. It was a voice, was it outside, was it downstairs.”

“It was in this room. Stop it Tom, it was in this room.”

“Alright. If it was. What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. But stop pretending it doesn’t mean anything.”

Tom continued to stand awkwardly, on the verge of reaching out his arm towards her shoulder. The sense of the event passing, his resumption of being a sensible voice in the wilderness wasn’t arriving this time. He tried to think of some way of acknowledging the situation that might, at the same time, steer it towards shutting down. Instead, he fumbled around in his brain and said, “Ghost?”

“Maybe,” said Lisa, letting the suggestion pass, less as a serious proposition and more of a concession that he had maybe started to take this - or at least her - seriously. She decided to let her wall down an inch or two as well.

“It’s going to be impossible to not sound a little crazy here, but I’ve been waking up at night and listening,” she said, indicating the radiator. “It still sounds like talking from far away. Have you tried?”

“I’ve not tried listening to the radiator, no,” said Tom, and got a look over the shoulder in response. He knew that was a mistake, but lacking any clear path other than just

saying “ghost” a second time, he stayed silent and looked vaguely up: the universal symbol for listening for something.

Nothing happened.

“I didn’t quite realise you had, I don’t know, stuck with this? After one word?” said Tom.

“We have two words now,” she said, “though it’s not really enough to extrapolate from.”

“How, uh, many do you think we need?”

“Depends on if we can get one a bit less generic,” she said. It was becoming clear to Tom that she had given this a lot of thought.

“It’s not going to be much help if I’m in here and a,” she looked at him, trying to keep him on board, “ghost says THE. But if we can get it to shout, for example, NUCLEAR SUBMARINE, we could be onto something. If it gave a date or a name.”

“Are we completely ruling out, like, someone outside the window? Or thin walls? I know we’re hard up for anything interesting and I like a scary mystery as much as the next guy, but,” he trailed off a bit.

“It was in the room, Thomas.”

“Don’t call me Thomas, it makes me sound like a cartoon cat.”

“It was in the room, your majesty.”

“My kingdom for a cup of tea.”

“Focus,” she said, “we’re almost discussing something here.”

“And so I come back to *what does it mean?*”

“That’s exactly what I’m asking!,” she exclaimed. “You’re the one trying to gradually change the subject.”

“I don’t mean what do the words mean,” he said, taking a few steps for the first time since he entered the room, “I mean what does *it* mean? The implications.” He waved his hands around in the air. “Are ghosts real? Is someone from another dimension talking to us? In our living room?”

“You don’t have to leap that far,” she said. Maybe getting him to step into the light had been a bad idea. “You’re right, we’ve only heard two words. We’re not at the *implications* stage yet. I just want to have a think about it.”

“But it has to be one or the other,” he said, “It’s mundane and there’s a hole in the wall or physics is nonsense.”

“I... don’t think,” Lisa began. She had not been the only one considering it. Had they been secretly taking alternate shifts at the radiator?

“This is where it goes,” he interrupted. “The logical endpoint. But it won’t be that. You’ll dive into this investigation out of sheer boredom and nothing more will happen. There won’t be an *implications* stage.”

“You don’t sound very much like you like a scary mystery as much as the next guy.”

“Not when the entirety of the investigation is lying on the floor.”

“Dismissing this doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“What’s in your notebook?”

“Oh sure, I can’t wait to get belittled for trying to think about something.”

“I don’t think this is a real thing, and debating it is pointless.”

“Great discussion, how long has passed since you exploded, terrified, into the room? Eighteen seconds?”

“I’m going to go outside.”

“But wait,” she said, “anything other than staying in this room is illegal.”

“I’m going to go to the supermarket and get some exercise and essential goods. Tell me if you hear anything about nuclear submarines.”

He did not get a response on his way down the stairs.

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April 19, 2020

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The phone vibrated next to her head. It was 6:15am, and without turning on the light she stuck out an arm towards the thermometer and put it under her tongue. When it was ready she tilted the phone screen towards it and squinted closely. She nudged Tom, who made a noise that managed to convey both that he had been awake since the initial alarm, but also that was heading back to sleep unless this was very important.

“Are we still fighting?” she asked.

“We are sleeping,” he said, extremely muffled, into the pillow.

“We missed the window,” she said.

“Window,” he said, partially awake.

“The fertility window. Temperature is up.”

“I thought up was good.”

“Up is good if you realised a couple of days beforehand that it was going to go up.

That’s the window.”

“Next month,” he said, eyes still closed.

“Next month was this month,” she said, “it’s already hard enough if we don’t even try to take the chances. I’m old.”

He shuffled over onto his back. “Not as old as me.”

“That doesn’t help!”

“Not as old as me,” he repeated, “and I’m not old. Therefore you’re not old. You don’t look a day over thirty-one.”

“I *am* thirty-one, which you obviously know. You could really genuinely try to say something that would make me feel better that’s not covered in two layers of jokes.”

“You are not old,” he said. “I am not old, and we will be fine. We have not been trying for long.”

“We’ve been trying for a while, there’s a calendar,” she said, but then, “OK.”

There were a few seconds of silence, with neither of them likely going back to sleep, and the air between them had suddenly been cleared by the introduction of a common enemy.

“What’s up with the voices?” asked Tom.

“I have no idea,” said Lisa, “When I heard them they were so intense, like they were directly inside my head. It was infuriating that you wouldn’t acknowledge it.”

“I guess for me they weren’t, you know, that loud. Like someone had climbed up the front of the house and shouted in the window. Weird and loud, but the kind of weird and loud my brother could do after a few drinks.”

“And you never heard the quiet ones?”

“In the radiator? No.”

“Did you try again?”

“Not, you know, the way you have been. But when I did I got absolutely nothing.”

“That’s what’s in my notebook. I might be able to hear a few more words but I really don’t know if I’m just going completely mad with lockdown stress and baby stress. It genuinely could be your brother whispering into the pipes.”

“He’s never been that quiet.”

She laughed, “You remember at our wedding, it wasn’t even ten pm yet and”

The voice said HEY.

Tom sat bolt upright and Lisa scrambled around for his hand, looking up, and then over at the window.

She narrowed her eyes slightly, this was different, not as intense, and started to speak when the voice continued DO YOU HAVE MY KEYS.

Tom leaned back and closed his eyes as Lisa exhaled and got out of bed. Outside the window was the jangling sound of keys hitting the ground.

CHEERS, said the voice.

“Yog-Sothoth, cosmic entity, progenitor of Cthulhu, has lost his fucking keys,” said Tom, “and our mystery is resolved.”

“I don’t have ‘cheers’ in my notebook,” said Lisa, pulling on some clothes.

“Are you getting up? It’s still only about half six. What even is there to do?”

“My heart rate is about a hundred and forty,” she said. “I’m going to go run as fast as I possibly can and bring it down a bit.”

“I’m going back to sleep,” said Tom. “I’ll get up at eight and get some work done and then start work and maybe I dunno do some work after work and have a beer or two. Maybe this voice has been going on for years but we have just now noticed it because we have to stay indoors eternally, world without end, amen.”

“Back to sleep is probably a good start,” said Lisa, closing the door gently behind her, “it’s Sunday.”

May 1, 2020

#

“It might be going in a loop,” said Lisa.

She was kneeling down next to the radiator, a small halo of items surrounding her: notebook and pen, phone, mug, a ruler and a stack of Post-It notes.

“Radiator shift bearing fruit again,” said Tom, sitting awkwardly perpendicular to her at the desk, typing with one hand and a cup of tea in the other.

“It comes and goes, but when it comes it’s been getting stronger,” she said. “I’ve definitely heard the same word multiple times. Obviously I’m looking out for *you* and *last*, but I’m confident that *happy* is in there as well. Whatever this message is, it could be a positive one.”

“It feels like, one way or another, we might be at the implications stage,” said Tom.

“One way or another?” she said, not fully paying attention.

“We heard two words,” he said, “and it’s been a month since the second one. I can’t hear anything down there and you’ve moved into some kind of weird nest. We should leave it be.”

“Listen, I can’t help that you’ve forgotten what it was like. You can’t hear anything because you refuse to.”

“I’m worried,” he said.

She put down the notebook and turned towards him. “Nest?” she said. “You make it sound like I live here, permanently. I haven’t gone near this thing for a week. I’ve been working, and grocery shopping, and worrying, and going very briefly outside, the same as you have.”

“But you’ve also been hearing words in the pipes and writing them down.”

She started to gather all the things encircling her and stood up, dropping them on the desk.

“It’s been a month since the last one, has it? I know that. I remember last month. You said something about next month, and now it’s next month. I had a negative test this morning. How’s *next* next month doing?”

“Ah. Shit,” said Tom.

“Ah shit indeed,” replied Lisa. “Can I wallow in my scary mystery for a little bit?”

“Were you going to tell me?” he asked.

“I was, I did.”

Tom walked over to the desk, and lacking any kind of space to actively sit down, he half-leaned on it beside her and put his head on her shoulder. She didn’t immediately shrug him off, which he took as encouragement.

“Everything I said last month still applies,” he said, “we’re young, it’s early days. You have a scary mystery in the meantime.”

She tried to move as little as possible, grudgingly accepting his head but suppressing a turn away. “It’s probably not even real.”

“I mean...”

“Yes, obviously you’ve been on the it’s-probably-not-even-real side since day one. I kind of wanted it to be real.”

“We all want physics to be nonsense.”

“Every month before lockdown, when we failed, I could get distracted.”

“And we’ve now seen all of television.”

“If I had heard the voice and then gone to the office the next day I would have completely forgotten it,” she said.

“Maybe we can find a better distraction.”

“I never cleaned that tea off the wall. It’s not like I didn’t have time.”

“If you want cleaning the flat to be your distraction, I wholehearted...”

The voice cut him off and said LISA.

“Holy fuck,” said Tom.

“It knows who I am,” said Lisa quietly.

“Holy fuck,” said Tom, again.

“I thought I heard it say that before, down there, but I didn’t believe it,” she said, still quietly, still sitting rigidly as if Tom’s head were still on her shoulder.

“Holy *fuck*,” said Tom, walking around the room, looking up, moving the blinds, knocking on the wall, taking out his phone and putting it away again.

“I have to get out,” said Lisa

She stood up and walked directly out of the room and down the stairs, slipping on her shoes in one fluid motion and leaving the front door open behind her. Tom brushed half of her radiator nest off the desk while scrambling for keys, he grabbed her phone and half-slid down the stairs. He put on his shoes and tied his laces in a manner that felt excruciatingly slow. He closed and locked the door behind him and ran out onto the path, looking left and right to see where Lisa had gone.

She was off to his left, half way down the road, walking extremely purposefully in the direction of the supermarket, fists closed, arms swinging. Tom set off on a light jog, keys jangling in his back pocket.

He caught up with her and she did not slow down or look in his direction. He maintained a sideways shuffling while she strode directly onwards.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m going to buy a croissant.”

“Who do we talk to about this?” he asked, short on breath.

“I don’t need to consult anyone for pastries. I think we’re low on tea as well, did you bring a bag?”

“Lisa,” he said, and lightly touched her shoulder.

She stopped and turned to him. “*My fucking name.*”

She turned forwards again and walked on. He let her get a little bit ahead, mostly as a way of avoiding having to come up with anything to say, as they approached the supermarket. He momentarily got annoyed that he had in fact not brought a bag, but regained focus as she approached the shop.

The doors slid open automatically and she kept the same pace and swerved left towards the bakery aisle, ignoring everything in her peripheral vision. Tom stood in front of the doors and fumbled with a surgical mask he happened to have in his back pocket. People looked at her uncomfortably as she passed by them too closely, breathing; they shuffled out of the way in complete silence, occasionally bumping into shelves and eyeing each other as they got too close to each other while trying to avoid Lisa. Tom tried to approach her but it was a complicated dance trying to stay the appropriate distance from anyone else.

Eventually he circled around through an empty pasta display and stood beside her as she picked up a clear plastic box with four almond croissants in it.

“They won’t sell them individually any more,” she said, “in case you touch one.”

“We need to call someone,” he said.

“Please help us, we heard a voice in the living room,” she replied quietly to the pastry.

“What?” he asked.

“It said my name Tom. How do I go back to that flat?”

“This is terrifying,” he said, “and we need to get someone to come and talk to us, to investigate. But you have to come home first.”

“No,” she said, “can’t go back.”

“We can’t go anywhere else,” he replied, “it’s literally illegal to go to anyone’s house. I think we’re breaking the law by standing still this long in the bakery section.”

“Can’t,” she said, “go back.” She walked off into the supermarket. Tom took a longer route around the front of the store and they reunited in front of a display of tea bags.

“Look obviously we can’t go to my parents, because they’re in darkest Wales,” said Tom, “and we can’t go to yours because they fucking love the rules and don’t like me very much.”

“I could maybe go,” she said, putting a box of tea under her arm. “You don’t have to come.”

“You can’t put them in the position of having to choose between you and the rules, they would combust.”

“How can I go back? There’s something there, it said my name. It’s talking to me.”

“I mean, I’ll be there,” he said.

She looked at him.

“Obviously, I believe it now,” he continued. “I’m all in. Scary mystery.”

“It’s too scary now.”

“We probably have a bit of time, right? There’s weeks or a month between these things, we can make a plan to go. I’m sure we can get out before the next one.”

“Even if it doesn’t say anything again, I’ll feel like it’s watching me.”

“You had a negative test this morning,” he said.

“Yes, of course, you’re right, I should worry about more things.”

“No what I mean is, if you got to the stage of taking a test, the next fertility window isn’t too far off. We can’t let what is, really, just a loud voice obstruct our actual real life.”

“I genuinely can’t decide if this is blackmail, manipulation or maybe even a valid point.”

“I also think we should call Hassan and Nadia because I think they would come over.”

“They don’t like rules as much as my parents do, no.”

Tom took his phone out of his pocket and swiped a few words and put it back in. It vibrated again almost immediately.

“Guess they’re home,” said Lisa with a humourless smile.

Tom looked at the message. “They’ll be over in an hour.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I said to prepare yourself for the weirdest shit you’ve ever experienced, and also that I’m at the supermarket buying beers.”

She nodded. “I think I’ll spend that hour outside and meet them at the door.”

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May 1, 2020, an hour later

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“Right,” said Hassan, all but physically rubbing his hands together. “I am one seventh of the way through a beer, and I’m ready for the weirdest shit I can imagine.”

Lisa shot Tom a look of concern.

“I know what he told you, but this one is serious,” she said.

Hassan, in turn, shot Tom a look of concern.

“It’s weird, as I said,” said Tom, “but also serious. We kind of need a how-insane-is-this check.”

“You can tell us,” said Nadia kindly, “he already starts to lose it after one sixth of a beer.”

“One sixth,” said Hassan, “is larger than one seventh, and I am not there yet.”

“Please,” said Lisa, looking again at Tom, who, more than anything didn’t want anyone to be uncomfortable. “Please,” she said again.

Everyone looked at her; Nadia smiling warmly, Hassan holding his beer and making an approximation of a serious face, Tom pale and sweating like an animal under experimentation. Lisa looked back at Tom expectantly, and the other two followed suit.

“We’ve been hearing voices,” said Tom, reluctantly taking the lead. Nadia glanced at Hassan who took a sip of beer and said nothing.

“Words, names,” he continued.

“Not *names*,” Lisa interjected, keen to get to the point, “*my* name. Today. An hour ago.”

“What do you mean you’re hearing voices?” asked Nadia. “In your heads?”

“In your heads at the same time?” asked Hassan.

“No,” said Tom, “Out loud. Very loud. Here. In this room.”

“Can we hear them?” asked Hassan, looking vaguely up. “Are they happening now?”

Lisa closed her eyes for a full three seconds before opening them again and saying, “No, the loud voices are not happening now.”

“It’s... infrequent,” said Tom, “and it’s only happened three times. The first one was maybe a month ago, the second, I dunno, a couple of weeks after that.”

“April 8 was the first one,” said Lisa, “and the second was on the 17th. The third was today, the third one said my name.”

“And that’s when you went to buy beers,” said Hassan. “Wise.”

Nadia looked at him, Tom looked at Lisa, Hassan raised his hand and took another sip. “Sorry, past one sixth now.”

“What words did you hear?” asked Nadia. “Your name and then only two others?”

“The first one was *you*”, said Tom, “and the second one was *last*”.

“What kind of sentences have you put together from that?” asked Hassan. “Where is your wall of newspaper clippings and string? That’s the first thing I’d do.”

“I think it’s all in the notebook,” said Tom, nodding in the direction of the desk.

Everyone looked at it, and then back at Lisa, who was looking past them out the window.

“You know, Lisa’s notebook,” said Tom, just a tiny bit louder, and at the mention of her name, Lisa blinked and returned back from wherever she had been.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve heard some things and written them down.”

“Other out-loud things?” asked Nadia.

“Quiet ones,” she replied.

“Can I have a look?” asked Hassan, and turning to Tom, “Have you seen them?”

“No,” said Lisa. “No to both.”

“Do you want us to, um,” Nadia trailed off, being unable to think of anything they could do. She looked over at Hassan who was drinking faster than he had been a few minutes ago, and then at Tom, who hadn’t blinked since the conversation started. “Can you tell us any of the other words?”

“I think *happy* is in there,” she said, “I don’t want to prejudice you. Tom can’t - won’t - hear the, I don’t know, supplementary words, but who knows if you will. You’re more likely to hear something if I prime you for it.”

Tom had pursed his lips at *won’t*.

“*Happy* is good though, right?” asked Hassan. “Happy at last? Happy you lasted this long? At last, you’re happy? I did that one already, kind of. I’m going to need more words if I’m going to riff on this. You don’t have to prime me, per se, but are there any swear words?”

Lisa stood up and everyone watched as a cushion fell to the floor by her side, landing almost noiselessly. She walked quickly, restraining herself from a full sprint, out of the living room. Hassan put an almost-empty can down gently on the floor by the leg of the chair while Nadia nearly burned a hole in him with a glare. She then stood up and followed Lisa out of the room.

Left alone, Tom and Hassan looked at each other in silence for a few seconds. Hassan picked up a beer and handed it to Tom, who accepted and opened it without actually looking directly at Hassan.

“So,” said Hassan, “you were looking for a how-insane-is-this check, is that correct?”

Tom somehow acknowledged this despite making no sounds or movements whatsoever.

Hassan continued: “I’m going to declare it ‘pretty fucking’. Grade one. DEFCON whichever one is the highest.”

“We both heard it every time,” said Tom. “It was loud, I think louder for her. I can’t figure anything that it can be at this stage other than, I don’t know,” his imagination returned again to its one room, “a ghost.”

“I mean, OK, it probably isn’t a ghost, it’s probably a person, shouting. There are billions of people in the world, a decent chunk of them in London, and at most a half dozen ghosts. If you got one, that would be a big deal.”

“Exactly what I’ve been saying!” said Tom, more animatedly than he’d been for weeks, “Right? If this is a real thing then it’s a world historical event.”

“Which means, I’m sorry to say again,” said Hassan, “that it isn’t real. You haven’t discovered ghosts. One world historical event per quarter is all we are permitted, and you’re not getting a private one.”

“We heard it say *Lisa*,” said Tom, “and real or not, she is losing her mind over it. Getting you guys to come over is the only way I could get her to come back inside the flat.”

“What happens when we leave?”

“Yeah. I know. I don’t know. We have to... I don’t know, I don’t want to necessarily use the word *placate*, but there’s enough going on that I don’t need this.”

“I can, I also don’t want to necessarily use the phrase *humour her*, but, give the radiator an ear.”

“It’s a start,” said Tom, finishing the beer. “Maybe you’ll genuinely hear it. It could also be useful if you make fewer jokes, and maybe shut the fuck up about fractions, Jesus Christ.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“Let’s start with the radiator thing then.”

Lisa sat on the edge of the bathtub, with Nadia sitting on the closed toilet seat beside her.

“He can be helpful in serious situations,” said Nadia, “you just have to weather the storm of jokes to get to the useful core. It’s well hidden, but honestly, if you can avoid punching him, he’ll probably have this situation figured out by the time we go home.”

“I know it sounds ludicrous,” said Lisa.

“I mean, yeah, it does a little,” said Nadia, “but have you ever tried to describe a nightmare to someone? It’s always funny or stupid.”

“Which one is this?” asked Lisa.

“I don’t mean that,” said Nadia. “I mean it can be terrifying and sound silly at the same time.”

“It is exceptionally poorly timed,” said Lisa.

“Yeah, we’re all going through this whole thing,” said Nadia.

“No,” said Lisa, looking at the bathroom bin. Nadia followed her gaze, and noticed, under a bundle of tissues, a white stick with a small pink line on it.

“Oh my god is that,” said Nadia.

“One line is negative,” interrupted Lisa.

“Oh yeah, of course. Still, though, exciting times.”

Lisa turned to her. “I don’t want exciting times. I want predictable times. Boring times. I want to go to work. I want to be in a building other than this flat. I want to,” she lowered her voice, “I want to get pregnant without making charts, and I don’t want a ghost saying my name while I’m trying to do it.”

“I don’t want this to come out the wrong way,” said Nadia, “but is it, you know, really real?”

“Yeah,” said Lisa, “it’s really real. I still can’t bring myself to actually believe it despite actually believing it and saying out loud that I actually believe it. This doesn’t

happen. If someone told me that Amazon had secretly wired my house with a speaker to scare me because that would somehow increase sales, then I would believe it instantly. That kind of thing happens, this doesn't. I can't call anyone, I can't look anything up. It's just a voice that said my name and I don't know where it came from."

"This stress can't help, you know, your plans," said Nadia.

"No. It doesn't."

"How long have you been trying, if I can ask?"

"Coming up on a year. We got a bit distracted in March."

"Is that, I don't think that's, I mean, unusually long?" said Nadia.

"It's around the border of when you should start to worry. At least that is something I can call someone about and look up."

They both sat silently for a few seconds.

"Should we go back out?" asked Nadia, "I'll try and keep the comedian under control."

They emerged from the bathroom to find more empty beer cans than they expected, but even less predictable was Tom and Hassan crouched by the radiator pointing out a particular section of the pipework. Hassan had obtained an Allen key from somewhere. Nadia made a deliberately loud footstep entering the room, and they both turned around.

"Hello again, OK, I'm on board," said Hassan, "I'm ten eights of the way through this beer and I'm ready for the radiator to put on a show."

The other three all gave him completely different looks that nonetheless made the same point.

“No, I’m serious,” he continued, “seriously serious. You know I can’t complete a sentence without making a joke, and so it’s difficult to tell when I’m actually being serious, but this time: serious.”

“I don’t even know what we expected you to do,” said Lisa, “other than to be another human being and let us say hey this thing is happening and it’s freaking us out.”

“Well I know what I expect me to do,” said Hassan, “the thing women always secretly want when they talk about their problems: to come up with a concrete and measurable plan to fix them.”

“That would, in this extremely narrow case, actually be very nice,” said Lisa.

“Perfect,” said Hassan. “Step one, I want to hear the radiator talk. We were trying while you were in the bathroom, but we were also drinking and talking to each other so it didn’t go very well.”

“I’m going to take you at face value, OK? Please don’t make a fool of me,” said Lisa, kneeling down. “I get the best of it from here,” she pointed at a narrow bending pipe near the floor. She kneeled down and reached for her notebook, but it didn’t come immediately to hand so she gave up. Hassan and Tom kneeled down either side of her. They stayed there in total silence for about half a minute.

“Goodbye,” said Hassan.

Lisa sat up like a shot, all the blood gone from her face.

“You gave up quick,” said Tom.

“Was that a word?” asked Hassan. “It’s all kind of repeating itself. Your name is in there too? I didn’t catch it.”

“Yeah,” said Lisa, quietly, unable to come out with any more.

Nadia joined them on the floor, replacing Tom, who stood up and left the room, and then they all passed another minute in silence.

“I’m not getting anything,” said Nadia.

“But you know who will,” said Hassan, “a computer. Here’s the next step: we get the best mic we can get our hands on and record this. Should be an improvement on your puny human ears. I know a guy I can borrow from.”

“OK,” said Lisa, “I’m with you so far.”

“We get a recording, give it to some professionals, get whatever the modern equivalent of Ghostbusters are - same, but ladies, I think - slip a trap under the radiator and then don’t go to the pub because they’re still closed and it’s illegal to be indoors.”

“When can you get it?” asked Lisa.

“Couple of days maybe.”

“Can you hold out a couple of days?” asked Nadia.

“We’ve not had any new voices that soon after a previous one,” said Lisa.

“And so having said all that,” said Hassan, “frankly it feels a little weird to stay here and watch TV or whatever while we’re all secretly thinking about the Demon of the Radiator, so we should probably take off. I’ll be in touch and we can wire up the appliance here, get more beers, maybe we can go legally outside by then.”

“We can find out what it wants,” said Lisa.

“Or who it wants, am I right?” said Hassan, and raised his hand for a high-five. It was not reciprocated. “Sorry, serious,” he said. “Tom! We’re leaving.”

Tom came back into the room, they all did an appropriate combination of hugs and handshakes and Hassan and Nadia left.

Tom and Lisa were alone in the flat, in silence.

“I’m not sure I can hang out and watch TV either right this minute,” said Tom.

“Well we can’t sit in silence for a couple of days.”

“We can’t worship at the radiator either.”

“I think I’m done with the radiator for the moment.”

“Do you feel any better?”

“Yeah maybe,” she said. “Saying it aloud, making a completely half-assed plan, it makes it both more real and less important.”

“I worry Hassan might not be the most reliable one for following through on schemes.”

“That’s on him for now. We could worry about the other thing instead,” said Lisa.

“What, the pandemic? Not much I can do there.”

“The other other thing.”

“Oh, that thing. There are too many other things. Did you do your temperature this morning?”

“I did, it’s borderline. Up a bit. I forgot to say and then the whole thing happened.”

“OK, so worth a shot then, what do you think?”

“Yes, best not miss another window. The chart says go, so I go.”

“That’s the romantic spirit,” said Tom. “It will get us away from the Demon of the Radiator for a little while, if nothing else.”

Lisa ever so slightly smiled.

“Haven’t seen any of those in a little while,” said Tom.

“I’m going to brush my teeth first,” said Lisa.

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May 13, 2020

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The alarm went off early, starting quiet and glowing slightly, sharing the top of a chair with assorted clothes and two books. The sound and brightness grew until Lisa managed to touch the part of the screen that makes it stop. She put the thermometer under her tongue for a minute and then took a look at the results.

“Hey,” she nudged Tom, “it’s gone up.”

Tom spoke incoherent syllables directly into his pillow.

“Yes, and I think we caught the window,” she said.

Tom made a noise.

“OK, yeah, back to sleep.”

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May 15, 2020

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Two pink lines. She did another one to be sure. Two more pink lines. She sat down on the edge of the bath, taking a moment to be the only one in the world with this knowledge. She lined the two tests next to each other on the edge of the sink. Four pink lines. She took out her phone and snapped an image. Looked at it. Reconsidered. What if two looks strange? She took away one of the tests and took another photo. Not sending it anywhere, obviously, not yet. Tom should probably know first. But not immediately. This moment was hers to live in. Alone in the bathroom. She took a photo of herself for no particular reason.

The floor vibrated gently, as if a truck passed by. She did not notice.

Nadia and Hassan had never come back to follow up on the plan. There had been another two weeks since any voices. It had just become legal to meet people outdoors again. There were two pink lines. There were four pink lines.

There was a thump from somewhere outside the room, outside the world.

Tom yelled from the living room. "Did you feel that?"

She smiled. She had felt it but it didn't matter. Don't shout. She picked up the two tests and buried them under whatever else was in the bin, then took them out and looked at them again. Took another picture, again of two of them, four lines, put them back out of sight.

She should tell him. Almost disappointing to do so, but she should.

Another heavy sound came from outside. Something broken?

"Are you in the bathroom? I'm going to check what the fuck that is," shouted Tom, ruining the moment. Maybe she wouldn't tell him. Maybe she would just disappear. Live in the desert, live in the woods.

No, it's time to tell him. It's time to leave the bathroom and tell him. It's time to leave the bathroom and decide whether to tell him.

She unlocked and opened the door, and saw Tom standing in the doorway, the top of the stairs between them, between the bathroom door and the living room door. He saw something in her face and stopped moving. She padded silently past him into the living room and put her hand on the radiator. She did not look down the stairs.

Then the voice screamed her name.

It filled her head, louder than before, filled the room, the window pane cracked. Tom fell to sitting, covering his ears.

LISA.

She didn't move, looked at the cracked glass, looked at Tom. His mouth was moving as if he was saying something, but she couldn't hear. She nodded at him anyway.

THE LAST ONE.

Too loud. The voice gave way to a shuddering vibration in the walls and floor of their home. The window buckled and the glass shattered. Tom looked at Lisa, at the window, at the top of the stairs.

Goodbye, said the voice. Quieter.

You were the last one, it said. Normal. Like another person in the room, in her head.

A colossal crunching noise came from the stairs. Tom's head turned very slightly towards it, Lisa remained completely rooted to the spot.

Lisa, said the voice.

She nodded.

Goodbye, it said.

She closed her eyes to not cry. Somehow recognising the voice now.

You were the last one to be happy, said the voice.

Lisa's hand moved slightly upwards, towards her stomach.

I'm sorry, said the voice, I'm sorry it had to be this way.

The house crunched once more; Tom made a move to stand up and lost his balance.

We couldn't live here, said the voice.

Tom made it to his feet and stumbled to the top of the stairs and looked down. He saw it and his legs stopped working. He sat down and crawled backwards, manically, frantically, into the living room. He turned to Lisa with tears in his eyes. Was he speaking? She couldn't tell. She nodded at him again.

A thing, oversized, misshapen, emerged from the top of the stairs and pushed through the door frame, splintering wood as it couldn't quite fit. It cracked the floor with its weight and shattered plasterboard with its size as it shrugged off the confines of the house to make it into the room.

It was human-shaped, but looked like it had been crudely constructed from earth and wood, bits of metal, congealed fluids and raw flesh. It was large and not fully in control of itself. It had only rough features, no fingers or toes, no face. It moved its head around in a shuddering manner, seeking something despite lacking eyes.

It moved forwards, stumbled as it walked, catching itself on its fists, punching holes in the ground as it stood back up, vibrating the room.

It oriented itself towards the radiator, towards Lisa.

Tom waited and waited, thought, waited, eventually dragged himself upwards and stumbled over to the gap between Lisa and the creature. He stood there helplessly, saying nothing. He put his arm weakly up towards it.

Lisa put a hand on his shoulder from behind.

He turned around and looked at her, tears coming down his face.

She closed her eyes.

The creature walked past him, through him, not even aware that he existed, and Tom crashed sideways, trying to grab the table on his way down. From the ground he saw the creature raise its arm and bring it down with immense force, unnatural speed on Lisa and she buckled and lost her shape, hitting the floor as a collection of broken pieces held loosely together. The creature instantly followed suit, losing its integrity, leaking, disintegrating, spreading oil and blood across the floorboards.

