

LBRIS

We know
books

Magpie

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THE HOUSE WAS PERFECT. Well, not perfect exactly, because houses never are, but at least the imperfections were liveable with. The flooring, which had clearly been bought in bulk by the developer, was a shade too light, the wood-laminate a touch too smooth to pass for real. The plantation shutters were plastic and layered with thin spores of dust. Someone had made the odd decision to put a bathroom on the second floor with doors that led out onto a roof terrace. Marisa stood on this terrace, her sandals shadowed on biscuit-coloured patio stones, and she looked down to the garden below, which had a strip of lawn lined with potted plants, the soil newly turned. She noticed the quiet, which was rare for London, especially when you were this close to a main road. When she commented on this, the woman who was showing her around nodded.

‘Yes, it’s got a lovely sense of calm to it.’

It was this that ultimately persuaded her. Marisa’s own childhood had been studded through with noise. In her memories, it was always the sound she remembered first. The discordant hesitations as her father attempted to play the piano. The slamming of an oven door, the jangle of an overloaded dishwasher shelf. The raised voices of her parents’ arguing. The shrill caterwaul of her newborn sister’s crying. And then, when Marisa’s mother had left, baby clamped to her, the house in the countryside had fallen silent. There had been no explanation.

Her mother had hugged Marisa tightly before leaving, whispering into her ear that she would return for her just as soon as she’d ‘got back on her feet’. Marisa can remember looking down at her mother’s shoes and wondering what was wrong with them. They were a pair of penny

loafers, the coin glinting through the ox-blood leather. She had tried, once, to wrinkle out the penny with stubby fingers, but it hadn't come loose. Looking at her mother's shoes, Marisa wanted to know why she needed time to get back on her feet when she was already on them. She wanted to know why her mother was going. Most of all, she wanted to know what was going to happen to her and why she was being left behind. She was seven.

Her father had worn pyjamas and slippers for a succession of long, stuffy days and his stubble had grown out into a patchy beard. In those sludgy, ill-defined weeks after her mother had left, Marisa tried to load the dishwasher the way her mother had liked, rinsing off the plates and putting the knives in handle first. After a while she grew tired of the domesticity and left the dirty crockery piled up in the sink. And then she had been sent to boarding school and there had been a whole different set of noises to contend with.

This house was the antidote to all of that, she saw now. She had examined it online, zooming in to look at the grey front door and the steps leading up to it. The brick was the colour of toasted hazelnuts. The road was, in the parlance of estate agents, 'leafy' and in a prime catchment area for the local school which had been rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted. That was important, because they were going to get pregnant as soon as they moved in together. That had been the plan, and thinking back to her discussions with Jake, she felt an unspooling of tension, as if a warm stone had been placed in the palm of her hand.

Jake was her safety, her berth, her rock, her anchor. She had used all these words to describe him, albeit not to his face as he wasn't given to shows of emotion. This was partly what had drawn her to him: he was unruffled by events and his solidity was uncompromising. He showed her how much he loved her through the things that he did, rather than the words he said. She knew Jake mistrusted overt displays of affection because he found them insincere. After Marisa's childhood experiences, where passion was deployed by her mother like heavy artillery in a battle with no clear end, she was relieved by Jake's undemonstrative nature.

When she visited the house, it felt right for them: a sanctuary of sorts, but light-filled and blank enough to furnish with their own character.

The kitchen was in the basement, every possible dividing wall knocked out so that the room stretched outwards like a beach. There was a mid-century walnut table with eight spindly-legged chairs, and low-slung lights with pale blue enamel shades over the island unit. An industrial-sized cooker that looked like it could be used to launch a rocket. A fridge buffed to a perfect metallic shine, with an in-built water system that dispensed ice cubes when you slotted your glass into place. A vast television hung on the white wall, an inky black square with a dot of red light in the corner as if it were a painting that had just been sold.

The woman said she felt Marisa was just the right person to move into the house. Marisa smiled.

‘These things can be so ...’ Marisa searched for the right word. ‘Instinctive, I guess?’

‘Instinctive,’ the woman nodded. ‘Exactly.’

It was when the woman opened the glass doors into the garden, folding them back on themselves like origami, that the bird flew in. It swooped in low and fast so that neither of them had a chance to stop it.

The woman ducked, shielding her head with her hand. Marisa winced. She hated birds. The flap of their wings. The sharpness of their beaks. The smallness of their dead pebble eyes.

A magpie. Black and white with petrol-streak purple across its feathers. The bird flapped around, panicked by its sudden incarceration. It was large, almost the size of a crow. It darted right up into the corner of the ceiling farthest away from where they were standing.

‘Shoo!’ the woman shouted, walking towards the bird, raising her arms up and down by her sides to scare it off. ‘Shoo!’

‘I don’t think—’ Marisa started. She had been going to say that she didn’t think it was wise to scare it, but the bird shot off before she could finish the thought. The tip of its powerful wing crashed into a small, intricately painted vase on the top of the bookshelf. The vase

teetered and then fell, splintering into pieces on the floor, shards of it gathering along the skirting board.

Then, as if some spell had been broken, the bird seemed to understand where it was. It flew in a straight line out of the open doors, passing so close to Marisa's face that she could feel the atomic weight of its movement in a gust of displaced breeze. It smelled mossy and slightly rotten. She imagined for a moment that she could sense the tickle of a feather, as if the magpie had grazed against her cheek in the mad flurry of flight.

'Good riddance!' the woman shouted after it, sliding the doors swiftly shut. The doors slotted into place with a sucking sound, and the muted noises of faraway traffic were cut off. The woman and Marisa existed once again in the centrifugal force of their glass and concrete bubble, with the outside world of feathers and fury made instantaneously separate. It felt peaceful, but also unnatural.

'I hope that didn't put you off,' the woman said.

'No,' Marisa smiled. 'Sorry about the vase though.'

The woman waved her hand as if to show it was of no great significance.

'These things happen.'

They shook hands warmly and Marisa told the woman she would have a think and then she would be in touch.

In truth, she didn't need to think about it. Jake was happy to leave decisions like this to her. He was unfussy about where they lived, he said, he just wanted her to be happy and for there to be enough room to start a family as soon as they moved in. He saw it as her domain and although Marisa should have felt indignant at this retrograde parcelling-up of the domestic, although she should have questioned the underlying implication that home and babies were *her* sphere while earning the money to keep both afloat was his, she secretly liked it.

On the street, she took out her phone to message him.

'Seen the house. Love it. Feels right.'

She did not add kisses. This was not their way.

She wasn't sure if she'd hear back from him straight away as he was in meetings all day. 'Back to back,' he had said, warning her there might be a delay and not to worry about it.

Jake worked for a consultancy firm in the city. Beyond that, Marisa had no clear idea of what he did, except she knew it was about making companies more streamlined and efficient, and there was a lot of travel involved, although not always to glamorous places. Recently, he had spent several weeks in Nottingham working for a pharmaceutical firm.

'Surprisingly good mid-century furniture shops,' was all he'd said.

'How are the books?' he'd ask, and she'd tell him about the orders she'd got that week via her website from dotting parents or aunts or godmothers wanting personalised storybooks for their little darlings. Marisa had a range of seven stories you could choose from online – there was the sleeping princess story, the dragon-slaying prince, the fearless adventurer, the naughty jungle monkey, and so on. You could type in the name of your child, upload a recent photograph and provide some defining characteristics, and Marisa would illustrate each book accordingly.

Her website was called Telling Tales and when it had launched last year, it was featured in some of the major glossy magazines. The Instagram account had several thousand followers and a blue tick. Marisa enjoyed the work because it was repetitive enough not to have to think too much and yet creative enough to be stimulating. It didn't make her a fortune, despite what her carefully filtered Instagram tiles might have you believe, and over the last few months, orders had slowed and she'd struggled to pay her rent. Which was why, when Jake suggested they move in together, she had jumped at the chance. That, and the fact she was in love with him, obviously.

'Woah, Ris, where did you find him?' her friend Jas had asked when she had first told her about Jake.

'Online,' Marisa said. 'I know, I know! You don't need to say. It's a miracle.'

Jas had been single for even longer than Marisa. They had spent lengthy evenings over consolatory glasses of Pinot Noir on Marisa's sofa bemoaning the lack of decent men, and both of them had got a

great deal of enjoyment from the cliched pose of being two women in their late twenties drinking wine while bemoaning said lack of decent men. They had signed up to dating apps at around the same time, the ones named after imperative verbs which were linked to pre-existing social media profiles and required Marisa to set about creating a personality for herself.

There were lists of favourite films and music and food. Endless questions to test compatibility over areas including religion and love and sexual predilection (polyamorous or gender fluid or 'sapiosexual', which Marisa had to Google to find out that it meant being turned on by intelligence) and whether you'd consider dating someone in debt and whether it was more romantic to go camping in the woods or be whisked away for a dinner in Paris.

All the answers went into some mysterious algorithm that determined, down to the closest percentage, whether you were a match with Peter, the director of a graphic design company with a nine-year-old son who meant the world to him, or Wez, a tennis coach from Crawley looking for a woman with warm eyes and a sexy smile.

Marisa became numbed to the stream of men who posed shirtless with motorbikes or German shepherds or who said they were 6ft when they were actually 5ft10 or who took spooky selfies in hotel-room mirrors so that the flash rebounded and illuminated the walls in dirty white like some budget horror movie. She was unmoved by Kevin who posed with a young girl holding a teddy bear and who had written in his potted biography 'Girl is my niece' while linking to his favourite Spotify tracks. He had Fleetwood Mac on there, like everyone else. She messaged him anyway and they went on a date and it was, like all the others, disappointing. Not in a way that made it terrible; in a way that made it mediocre, and that was worse.

She had texted him to say thank you for the date and she had watched as the WhatsApp tick turned from single grey to double grey and then to double blue, the garishness of the jolt of colour pricking her eyes so that she realised she had been staring at the screen waiting for it to happen. He had read the message. She kept looking at her phone to see whether he would reply, looking out for the tell-tale

'typing ...' to appear, the ellipses a signal of optimistic intent, three dots suggesting continuation and open endings. But there had been nothing.

After Kevin, she had told Jas she was giving up the apps altogether.

'I hear you, babe,' Jas said, wincing as she recounted the evening.

'It's like they think I'm ... weird or too much or something,' Marisa had said. 'I can see it in their eyes.'

'You're reading too much into it.' Jas twiddled a small diamond hoop in her earlobe. 'Like I always say, it's maths.'

Jas had read an article online about the fact that there were fewer men than women on dating apps, and she cited it frequently.

'And when you're a Black woman, it's even worse,' she said. 'Trust me. Hardly anyone swipes right on me.'

'Racists,' Marisa said.

'Yeah, but honestly though.' Her face was serious and Marisa felt bad. 'It's everywhere.'

'I texted Kevin.'

'Again?' Jas looked at her.

In fact, Marisa had texted Kevin several times. At first, she simply wanted to tell him he owed her an explanation but then she had got angry and accused him of being a misogynist prick. Her last WhatsApp had simply said 'Fuck off.' He'd stopped reading her messages. The ticks no longer went blue. Or perhaps he had blocked her. That kind of thing had happened before.

Marisa nodded, taking the bottle of wine from Jas to fill up her glass. 'I just wanted to draw a line under it.'

'Makes sense,' Jas said.

Jake had been different from the start. For one thing, he always responded to her messages. They had met at a theme party, organised by the online agency she had signed up to which prided itself on 'finding your perfect match'. It was a dreary, fancy-dress affair and Marisa drank too much. She had chatted briefly to him at the bar and he had insisted she take his number.

She had woken up with a fuzzy head the next day, but there was already a text from Jake on her phone when she reached for it. He

messaged her consistently for about two weeks before he asked whether she'd like to meet up for a date.

Instead of drinks or dinner, Jake had suggested a cafe in the middle of the day, which Marisa liked. It meant there would be no tipsy awkwardness at the end about whether to kiss or not. It was unthreatening and uncomplicated: a simple meeting to see whether they still gelled.

He was already sitting at a table by the window when she got there, a cup of coffee in front of him with a small shortbread biscuit on the saucer in the shape of a star. His blond-brown hair was short and unfussy, swept into place with a moderate amount of gel. His clothes were freshly pressed and unexceptional: a grey T-shirt with no logo; chinos worn in at the knees; a dark belt with a burnished brass buckle; a watch with a dulled silver strap.

When she walked into the cafe, Marisa felt a strange sense of peace settle just underneath her breastbone, as though a bird's wings had stopped their fluttering.

'Hi.'

She wasn't sure how to greet him, so she held out her arm to shake his hand, which he did while looking her directly in the eyes. He made no motion to lean forward and graze her cheek, and she was relieved when he sat back down on his side of the table, and she took a chair opposite him with just the right amount of distance between them.

He smelled of freshly washed laundry. No cologne. His face was uncomplicated: a defined chin and boyish cheeks. Kind eyes. A smattering of sandy-coloured stubble. He had looks you could imagine ageing well and at the same time you could see instantly what sort of a child he had been. Underneath his T-shirt was a ripple of muscle, but it was muscle that didn't like to announce itself. It was not gym-obsessive muscle, but the understated strength of a man who could, if required, be counted on to push a car whose engine had given out.

In the cafe, Jake took quiet charge. He asked Marisa what she'd like to order, and then conveyed this desire to the waitress as if Marisa might find it too much bother to do it herself. She liked that. She

could imagine Jas rolling her eyes at her lack of feminist outrage. Her tea arrived in a glass pot on a wooden tray with a rectangular egg-timer.

'I don't know if you've had our tea before,' the waitress said. She had a tiny gold stud on the side of her nose. Marisa shook her head. 'Right, OK, so you need to let it brew for three minutes to get the full flavour.' The waitress turned the egg-timer upside down. Inside, the fine, black sand started to trickle down.

'Wow,' Jake said as soon as the waitress had left them to it. 'That's a complicated cup of tea.'

Marisa laughed.

'I'm more of an English Breakfast man myself,' he said.

'Yes, I can see that,' she replied, playful but not too much.

After that, the conversation came easily, passing between them fluidly like the egg-timer grains. They spoke about upbringings. He was the oldest of four, with three younger sisters, he told her. He was close to his mother, raised in Gloucestershire, 'and still a country boy at heart'.

'Do you go in for all those country pursuits?'

He laughed.

'I don't think I've ever heard anyone actually *say* country pursuits. I mean, outside the pages of a Victorian novel, that is.' He looked at her, unblinking. 'It's very quaint.'

She flushed.

'Don't worry, it's charming. And no, not really. I've been to the odd pheasant shoot but fox hunting is not really my thing. I quite like ... foxes.'

He caught her eye and Marisa was left with the distinct impression that he meant to refer to her when he spoke the word.

He brought up the subject of children. It was unusual for a man to mention it, even more so on a first date and given their age difference – Marisa was twenty-eight and Jake eleven years older.

'But, you know, I want to be able to play football with my kids,' he said. 'I don't want to be the only dad at the school gates getting his hips replaced.'

'You're not that old!' Marisa said.

Jake stretched back, resting one arm on the table and placing the other on the back of his chair. He had an effortless capacity to inhabit a space. She liked the way he could have been carved out of blocks of wood.

The cafe was beginning to fill with the thrum of the lunchtime rush: mothers pushing buggies and businessmen in suits and young women in glasses and cropped jeans carrying laptops in rucksacks. Jake and Marisa had to raise their voices to hear each other over the clattering of chrome chairs and hissing of the espresso machine.

'To be honest, I've always wanted kids young,' Marisa said. 'I think I told you, my mum was twenty-one when she had me and ...' She let the thought drift, annoyed with herself for having said something she did not particularly want to share. She couldn't remember what she'd told him on their first meeting and Marisa did not want to reveal too much. Her mind ballooned with an image of her beautiful but dishevelled mother, dungaree dress unbuttoned so that her breast could slip out to feed the mewling baby, and Marisa had to make a conscious effort to remove the memory so that she could return to the conversation in the cafe with Jake. Don't go there, she told herself. Come back. You are here, right now, with this man. Do not fuck this up like you have done before.

She took a breath and smiled and fiddled with her teaspoon.

'I just think it would be great – a couple of kids, a dog ...' Marisa said and as she did so, she took a risk. She leaned forward casually and grazed his wrist with the tips of her fingers. She felt a crackle of energy, a fission of some sort, as if two molecules had collided and meshed and sparked into a new thing.

Jake looked surprised. She removed her hand quickly and carried on talking as if nothing had happened, while all the time suspecting that everything had.

Later, he will tell her that he knew from the moment she reached across and touched his arm that Marisa was 'the one'. She thought the phrase sounded like something she usually put in her hand-drawn fairytales, but it turned out to be true.