

The Stranger

My hands shake as they clutch the steering wheel. The heating's on the blink again, and a bitter wind curls up round the car, spreading frost across my back windows. The dashboard clock says it's nine in the morning, and the sun finally sits in the sky. I've been driving for two hours in the dark, sitting here shivering in driving gloves, spectacles, a fleece, and brown corduroy trousers. No point hiding it now: today I've finally become old. Well it's probably about time at seventy-eight – but I've been middle-aged since I was twelve and, as always, I'm reluctant to change.

Ah well. Happy birthday Jack. Happy New Year.

Near the town the snow lies in sprinkled patches by the roadside. I can already make out the sea, calm, still, silent. Through the frosted windscreen it looks like a sheet of ice in the distance. The roads are empty, the streets deserted. Down London Road, to the corner of Forest Street. I pass the station, the platform empty. That next corner was bombed in the war and my friends and I made it our playground afterwards. I learnt football amongst the rubble. It's a Jobcentre now.

And then I can't stop them, the images flickering at the edges of my windscreen, filling every street I pass, time smudging before my eyes: Fran falling off the swings – confetti at the church door – my mother with her ration book hovering in shop doorways – little fingers pressed into mine – three digits slammed into a telephone box – that time Fran dropped her teddy out the car window – what was its name? – my father's starched shirts – the scream and screech of the air-raid siren – teacups – fish and chips – Alice's smile.

She doesn't linger in the streets with the rest of the ghosts. She takes

her usual seat on the passenger's side and lays a hand on my arm.

The terrace houses I once knew are painted differently now. Today they're covered in gleaming Christmas lights, their curtains shut tight. Everyone but me is asleep. A few of the houses look derelict, a mess of boarded-up windows and overgrown gardens. Jim Henderson's house has ivy growing over the door. He must be almost ninety by now – if he's still alive.

Silence reigns through half-familiar streets as I drive towards the beach, past St Matthew's Church, past Linton Primary School. It was built in '78. I remember that. And here's Avonworth Terrace, the old houses as grand as ever, those towering white Victorian buildings. We used to joke that we'd buy one if we ever got rich.

I park facing the coast.

It has been twenty-three years. The old ice-cream parlour on the seafront has changed its sign and is shuttered now. I can't tell if it's closed for the winter or forever. The penny arcades that were in full swing and shine when I left look dated and cheap. The sign of the old fish and chip shop reads *F SH ND IPS*.

Outside the car the wind hits me like a wave of memory, and the silence is replaced by the slow roar of the sea. Alice is here. No surprise there. She's at my side as I lock the car. Hands firmly buried in my fleece pockets, I begin to walk along the coast. Her hand creeps into my pocket to take mine for warmth, her other arm around my shoulders. Her breath like mine disturbs the air and her footsteps crunch the frost as she walks. And suddenly my age slips from me and the years rewind and I am fifty, forty, thirty, and she is here, she is here, she is here.

I turn.

She is not here. Ghostly arms slip from my shoulders, because she is gone, and coming here will not bring her back.

No, she would say, but you know what it would do? You know, don't you, Jack, what it would bring back?

Yes Alice. I know. You are right, like you always were.

From the seafront I walk towards the town centre. The high street has – had – a grocer's, a butcher's, a bakery, a pub, one or two cafés, a few gift shops, one charity shop, one tiny bookshop, and a handful of restau-

rants. Now Ashby and Sons and Wellers' have been replaced by a Sainsbury's Local, and Lucini's has closed down. We used to go there for our anniversaries. The others have mostly been replaced too: new signs, new products, new owners. Finbaar's, where I worked as a boy, is called The Cakery. There's a new restaurant called The Lighthouse Bistro, along with a Pizza Express and a kebab place. Only the White Hart and the bookshop look the same, and they seem out of place now, relics from decades ago caught in the web of time. Everywhere is closed for the holiday, except for one tiny corner shop. The door's open, but I don't recognise the man inside, and he looks more interested in his phone than in anything else. There are peeling posters in the window: monthly film showings in the town hall, a winter craft festival at St Matthew's, an out-of-date advert for the school Christmas play.

Up the street I pass what was once St Mary's Secondary Modern School. Now the sign says it's called Lucas Academy. Yet here it is, the place where five years of my life slipped by. If I were to push my fingers through the railings by the gate, there on the brickwork I'd be able to trace where me and Fred Hobart marked our names before we left. But it's changed. There's a new modern block to one side. It's all closed up for the Christmas holidays, and a strange silence hangs over the buildings.

I walk on up the street, past a middle-aged woman out with her dog. She nods at me, and for a moment some vague image of a younger face floats through my mind. I can't even remember if I know her.

The crossroads creep up on me. With a gulp, I turn and am brought face to face with the Strangers' Café.

There was a launderette to the left of it when I last stood on this spot and an old knick-knack shop to the other side. Now the café neighbours a derelict shop to the right and to the left there are only houses. Its awning is drawn in and the sign has been repainted since I was last here. The sign and the window frames are scarlet now, not navy. Yet the café's name is written in the same old white script, and there's the familiar pale blue silhouette of the town, the pier, the lighthouse, all stencilled onto the window.

And there's a light through the window. I thought it would be closed on New Year's Day. I cross the road towards it and I'm shaking with the cold.

My ghost, my Alice, stands beside me once more. She crosses the street

with me, stretching out her hand towards the café, our café, and she's saying: coffee, Jack? Or how about a cup of tea?

My heart thumps as I look through the windows. It is empty aside from a young woman – too young to remember me – standing across the café with her back turned. She's only just visible through the skyline on the windowpanes. From here she looks as though she's staring at the walls. I stare with her, casting my eyes over the counter, the marked tables pushed to the side, the chairs stacked on top of them, a terrifying mix of familiarity and newness, and Alice is beside me and the weight of the past is all too much and before I know what is happening I find myself pushing through the door.

The young woman turns, and suddenly my hands are trembling. I cannot move from the doorway. The paint brush in her hand, the ladder across the room. I hadn't noticed the transparent plastic thrown over the furniture. She wasn't staring at the wall; she was painting it. A decorator maybe. Hired help.

No, Alice whispers; no Jack – her face. You know who she is.

The young woman smiles and my heart jolts. 'So sorry,' she says, in a bright, cheerful voice. 'I'm afraid we're closed today – I'm just here touching up on the decorating. We'll be open again tomorrow, if you want to come back then.'

For a few moments I can't speak. When at last I catch my breath, words tumble from my mouth. 'No, I – I'm just here for the day actually – I, um—'

'I'm afraid you won't find much open here today,' she says. 'Whole town's gone into shutdown for New Year's. If you like I can make you a cup of tea or something though? You must be freezing being out on a day like this.'

'No, no thanks, I – I'm fine. Thank you.'

As I back out of the door, she says, 'Sure I can't get you anything?' and I shake my head again. I close the door behind me and walk away as fast as my stiff legs will go.

And Alice says, you're a coward Jack, hiding from the past.

Yes love. Yes of course. I always was.

She will not go yet. She is waiting for something else. She hovers

about me, her hand reaching for mine again. She knows that only she could comfort me in my strange fear, my terror of these unshakable muddled memories.

Aren't you going to the house, Jack? Aren't you going back to look at our house?

I'd planned to, but I can't do it. It's too much. My mind is screaming already, my whole body shuddering. If I couldn't even stand inside the café for more than a minute, how could I ever cope with looking up at the house where I lived with Alice, was happy with Alice? It would be impossible. After all, you can never really go back. The weight of the past bears down on me like rain and Alice, darling, I'm so tired.

So I run away. Back down past the school, back through the town centre, back towards the beach as fast as physically possible. Past a few residents, past unknown faces and half-known houses. I move on as quickly as I can, tearing through the net of history I would rather forget.

As the car comes into view, Alice looks at me and frowns. No dear, I don't want to forget you. Besides, even if I were to run forever I'd never be able to do that – as you well know. I get in and shut out the wind, smothering the sound of the sea. I turn the key, start the engine, switch on the heating – and then tears gather in my eyes.

Alice would think that I should have gone back, but she wouldn't say so. She knows my heart is breaking, that it's been breaking for twenty-three years.

I am running away again. For now. I drive along the coast out of town and let the car trundle me home. And whenever I glance at the passenger side, there sits my ghost, my Alice. One moment she frowns, because she is disappointed. The next she smiles, because she knows one day I will be back.