

## Day Zero, just after midnight

Jen is glad of the clocks going back tonight. A gained hour, extra time, to be spent pretending she isn't waiting up for her son.

Now that it is past midnight, it is officially the thirtieth of October. Almost Halloween. Jen tells herself that Todd is eighteen, her September baby now an adult. He can do *whatever he wants*.

She has spent much of the evening badly carving a pumpkin. She places it now on the sill of the picture window that overlooks their driveway, and lights it. She only carved it for the same reason she does most things – because she felt she should – but it's actually quite beautiful, in its own jagged way.

She hears her husband Kelly's feet on the landing above hers and turns to look. It's unusual for him to be up, he the lark and she the nightingale. He emerges from their bedroom on the top floor. His hair is messy, blue-black in the dimness. He has on not a single piece of clothing, only a small, amused smile, which he blows out of the side of his mouth.

He descends the stairs towards her. His wrist tattoo catches the light, an inscribed date, the day he says he knew he loved her: spring 2003. Jen looks at his body. Just a few of his dark chest hairs have turned white over the past year, his forty-third. 'Been busy?' He gestures to the pumpkin.

‘Everyone had done one,’ Jen explains lamely. ‘All the neighbours.’

‘Who cares?’ he says. Classic Kelly.

‘Todd’s not back.’

‘It’s the early evening, for him,’ he says. Soft Welsh accent just barely detectable on the three-syllable *ev-en-ing*, like his breath is stumbling over a mountain range. ‘Isn’t it one o’clock? His curfew.’

It’s a typical exchange for them. Jen cares very much, Kelly perhaps too little. Just as she thinks this, he turns, and there it is: his perfect, perfect arse that she’s loved for almost twenty years. She gazes back down at the street, looking for Todd, then back at Kelly.

‘The neighbours can now see your arse,’ she says.

‘They’ll think it’s another pumpkin,’ he says, his wit as fast and sharp as the slice of a knife. Banter. It’s always been their currency. ‘Come to bed? Can’t believe Merrilocks is done,’ he adds with a stretch. He’s been restoring a Victorian tiled floor at a house on Merrilocks Road all week. Working alone, exactly the way Kelly likes it. He listens to podcast after podcast, hardly ever sees anyone. Complicated, kind of unfulfilled, that’s Kelly.

‘Sure,’ she says. ‘In a bit. I just want to know he’s home okay.’

‘He’ll be here any minute now, kebab in hand.’ Kelly waves a hand. ‘You waiting up for the chips?’

‘Stop,’ Jen says with a smile.

Kelly winks and retreats to bed.

Jen wanders aimlessly around the house. She thinks about a case she has on at work, a divorcing couple arguing primarily over a set of china plates but of course,

really, over a betrayal. She shouldn't have taken it on, she has over three hundred cases already. But Mrs Vichare had looked at Jen in that first meeting and said, 'If I have to give him those plates, I will have lost every single thing I love,' and Jen hadn't been able to resist. She wishes she didn't care so much – about divorcing strangers, about neighbours, about bloody pumpkins – but she does.

She makes a tea and takes it back up to the picture window, continuing her vigil. She'll wait as long as it takes. Both phases of parenthood – the newborn years and the almost-adult ones – are bookended by sleep deprivation, though for different reasons.

They bought this house because of this window in the exact centre of their three-storey house. 'We'd look out of it like kings,' Jen had said, while Kelly laughed.

She stares out into the October mist, and there is Todd, outside on the street, at last. Jen sees him just as Daylight Saving Time kicks in and her phone switches from 01:59 to 01:00. She hides a smile: thanks to the clocks going back, he is deliberately no longer late. That's Todd for you; he finds the linguistic and semantic back-flipping of arguing a curfew more important than the reason for it.

He is loping up the street. He's skin and bones, doesn't ever seem to gain weight. His knees poke angles in his jeans as he walks. The mist outside is colourless, the trees and pavement black, the air a translucent white. A world in greyscale.

Their street – the backend of Crosby, Merseyside – is unlit. Kelly installed a Narnia-style lamp outside their house. He surprised her with it, wrought iron, expensive;

she has no idea how he afforded it. It clicks on as it detects movement.

But – wait. Todd’s seen something. He stops dead, squints. Jen follows his gaze, and then she sees it, too: a figure hurrying along the street from the other side. He is older than Todd, much older. She can tell by his body, his movements. Jen notices things like this. Always has. It is what makes her a good lawyer.

She places a hot palm on the cool glass of the window.

Something is wrong. Something is about to happen. Jen is sure of this, without being able to name what it is; some instinct for danger, the same way she feels around fireworks and level crossings and cliff edges. The thoughts rush through her mind like the clicking of a camera, one after the other after the other.

She sets the mug on the windowsill, calls Kelly, then rushes down the stairs two at a time, the striped runner rough on her bare feet. She throws on shoes, then pauses for a second with her hand on the metal front doorknob.

What – what’s that feeling? She can’t explain it.

Is it *déjà vu*? She hardly ever experiences it. She blinks, and the feeling is gone, as insubstantial as smoke. What was it? Her hand on the brass knob? The yellow lamp shining outside? No, she can’t recall. It’s gone now.

‘What?’ Kelly says, appearing behind her, tying a grey dressing gown around his waist.

‘Todd – he’s – he’s out there with . . . someone.’

They hurry out. The autumn cold chills her skin immediately. Jen runs towards Todd and the stranger.

But before she's even realized what is happening, Kelly's shouted out: 'Stop!'

Todd is running, and within seconds has the front of this stranger's hooded coat in his grasp. He is squaring up to him, his shoulders thrust forwards, their bodies together. The stranger reaches a hand into his pocket.

Kelly is running towards them, looking panicked, his eyes going left and right, up and down the street. 'Todd, no!' he says.

And that's when Jen sees the knife.

Adrenalin sharpens her vision as she sees it happen. A quick, clean stab. And then everything slows way down: the movement of the arm pulling back, the clothing resisting then releasing the knife. Two white feathers emerge with the blade, drifting aimlessly in the frozen air like snowflakes.

Jen stares as blood begins to spurt, huge amounts of it. She must be kneeling down now, because she becomes aware of the little stones of the path cutting round divots into her knees. She's cradling him, parting his jacket, feeling the heat of the blood as it surges down her hands, between her fingers, along her wrists.

She undoes his shirt. His torso begins to flood; the three coin-slot wounds swim in and out of view – it's like trying to see the bottom of a red pond. She has gone completely cold.

'No.' Her voice is thick and wet as she screams.

'Jen,' Kelly says hoarsely.

There's so much blood. She lays him on her driveway and leans over, looking carefully. She hopes she's wrong, but she's sure, for just a moment, that he isn't here any

more. The way the yellowed lamplight hits his eyes isn't quite right.

The night is completely silent, and after what must be several minutes she blinks in shock, then looks up at her son.

Kelly has moved Todd away from the victim and has his arms wrapped around him. Kelly's back is to her, Todd facing her, just gazing down at her over his father's shoulder, his expression neutral. He drops the knife. It rings out like a church bell as the metal hits the frozen pavement. He wipes a hand across his face, leaving a smear of blood.

Jen stares at his expression. Maybe he is regretful, maybe not. She can't tell. Jen can read almost everyone, but she never could read Todd.