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One Morning

Charles Lambert

She's putting the boy to bed when her cell phone rings. I'll be back to tuck you in, she says, just settle down, all right? The boy nods, reaches for his book to find the page his mother will read from, a book he brought from home. It'll be Daddy, his mother says, picking a T-shirt up to fold as she leaves the room.

She's right. She hears the usual click.

I can't talk long, he says. Is everything all right?

I miss you, she says, after a moment. We both do. Apart from that, we're OK.

Are you being looked after properly?

Oh yes, she says, no complaints at all.

The uncles?

She smiles, despite herself. They're fine. They're behaving themselves.

I should hope so, he says. The swimming pool? Is the weather good enough?

Yes, it's lovely. We're both getting tanned. At least the weather's good here, she says, and immediately wishes she hadn't. She doesn't want to complain.

That's good, he says. Don't overdo it though, will you? It's miserable here, as always. It rains all the time. I hate this place. He pauses. Someone's telling him to stop, she thinks. I have to go, he says. After another pause, he adds, I love you.

I love you too, she says, but she doesn't say what she's thinking. That if he really loved her he'd be here beside her, beside them both. She doesn't say it because she knows it isn't true. If he could be with them, he would. And then he does say it, these very words – If I could be there with you, I would be – and she's on the brink of tears. I know you would, she says. I know that, darling. But already he's hung up.

Sleep tight, she says into the silent phone.

The boy is sitting up in bed, the book open beside him.

He sends you all his love, his mother says.



The boy shrugs. Read me the one about the giant again, he says, patting the bed. The evil giant.

But you must have heard that story a hundred times, his mother says, pulling the sheet straight and sitting beside the boy.

The boy shrugs again. I don't care. You said I could have whatever story I want. And that's the one I want.

His mother picks up the book. By the time she has finished reading, the boy is asleep against her shoulder, his head slumped forward, the slight frown creasing his forehead the perfect image of his father's. He's as stubborn as his father too, she thinks, not sure if this pleases her. It isn't enough to be proud of someone to be pleased by them, she thinks. She stands up, leaves the door slightly open and the light above the stairwell turned on, just in case. Sometimes the boy dreams that the evil giant is still alive, and cries out in his sleep, and his mother rushes through to comfort him back to sleep. There is no evil giant, she whispers, until the boy settles down. All the doors are open, that's how they sleep in this house. It strikes her once more how odd it is that open doors should make you feel safer than closed ones.

Her brother-in-law is sitting downstairs with one of the other men, the ones the boy calls his uncles. So many uncles for one small child. They're playing backgammon and drinking vodka, filling their glasses as soon as they're empty, banging the pieces down on the board. She thinks about turning on the TV, a 48 inch LED screen hanging on the wall beside the unused fireplace and fed by a clutter of satellites, one of them pointing, as she likes to call it, home. No, not tonight. Neither of the men looks up as she crosses the room and shifts the side of a curtain to see outside. The fabric looks expensive, but feels cheap, like so much in this house, this over-priced fake luxury she both despises and admires. She wonders what her friends from the village would make of all this privilege, this privation. Some of them, she knows, would envy her, even now. The floodlights are on in the garden around the villa, shining on the white-painted concrete walls and the plants she's had put in, whose names she doesn't know, reflecting on the surface of the pool, she supposes, although she can't see it from here. She'd have to go outside and someone would stop her, if she



didn't stop herself first. She's her own security by now, it's hardwired into the system. She asks the men if they're hungry, wondering where the other uncles are. Her brother-in-law raises his eyes in her direction, stares at her briefly, then shakes his head.

You eat, he says. We'll get something later.

She goes into the kitchen and makes herself a sandwich, cheese and ham and gherkin, although she isn't hungry. She has to force herself to eat. She stands at the window, sandwich in hand, thinking about her husband. She is waiting for him to make things right again, to make the world make sense again. She closes her eyes and sees the evil giant from her son's book, and wonders what the appeal of the story is. Why do we need to be scared, she wonders. What was that story she read as a student, of a man's crime being written on his body, over and over again, until he died? Is that what must happen to her, to her son, the endless scratching of the needle as a sentence she can't read is inscribed in their skin? How long is it now they've been waiting, in this house that holds nothing for her but a hunger she can't quite tame, that isn't for food but for some decision to be made? Behind her, in the meaningless foreign room, there is laughter, but the uncles are talking too low for her to hear.

Earlier that day, her son ran into the house.

There's a monster in the garden, he said.

A monster? she said, her heart beating fast. What kind of monster?

Big and fat, the boy said, and grey and lumpy. He made a shape with his hands the size of an orange.

Where did you see it? she said, and her son pointed with his perfect little arm towards the wall.

Over there, he said, and then it walked like this. And he mimicked the walk so perfectly she understood at once.

You saw a toad, she said, and laughed with relief. Toads aren't monsters. They're like us. They're part of the world.

Next day, early, before dawn, she's woken by some change in the air, a silence, unusual traffic noises perhaps. She wakes up sometimes



and doesn't know where, or what, she is, as though she's been changed into something else as she slept. Today, though, is different. She'll ask herself later what it was that made her sit up in bed and turn her head immediately in the direction of her son, separated by a single wall, so close that when sleep doesn't come to her she can hear the child breathing, or tells herself she can. What would it be like, she wonders sometimes, to hear nothing, no sound of anyone you love? She has always been near enough to hear the breathing of the people who matter. This morning, the noise she hears, or imagines she has heard, the revving up of a scooter maybe, the rubbish van emptying bins, should be somewhere outside the walls of the villa, but it seems to have been too close for that, as though it's beneath her window. Anxious in this new, unnatural silence, she gets up, reaches for a robe and slips it on. Before she's reached her son's door, her brother-in-law is on the landing, in boxer shorts, so like her husband that for a moment she can't believe it's not him. She wants to run to him to be held.

Did you hear something? she says. He shakes his head, then nods.

Better safe than sorry, he says. He's holding a baseball bat in one hand. Go into the boy's room, he tells her. Get him ready, just in case. Wait for me there.

The boy is wide awake. He's holding the book and his penguin. What's happening? he says. Not turning on the light, in the pre-dawn gloom, his mother opens a drawer and takes out a T-shirt and a pair of shorts.

Be a good boy and put these on, she says, then come with me. I want you to help me choose what to wear. She's determined not to scare the child, but she won't skulk in the room either, as though she had something to hide. Come here, my darling, she says as the little boy gets out of bed and slips on the clean T-shirt. My darling, she says a second time, helping the small feet through the holes of the shorts, pulling them up with a gesture that turns into a hug. Don't forget Penguin, she says, and the little boy picks up the penguin and the book, one in each hand, and follows his mother along the corridor to the dressing room.

Two of the uncles are standing at the top of the stairs. When she glances at the nearest, he raises a finger to his lips, then smiles and



shrugs. She's supposed to be reassured by this, she imagines, and, briefly, is. They go into her room.

Now what shall I wear? she says, Come and help me decide, and the little boy sits on the stool by the dressing table and watches his mother open the wardrobe doors and run her hand along the rows of clothes. He doesn't speak.

Ten minutes later, they're having breakfast – cereal for the boy, who isn't hungry and plays with his food, coffee for her, with extra sugar for strength – when a grinding noise comes from outside, and she understands at once that the gate has been forced. She jumps to her feet and reaches the main door to the villa only seconds behind her brother-in-law and the two men. Where were the others, she'll wonder later, when there is no one left to ask. They shout to her to get back, *get back*, waving their arms, the weak light glinting on their guns. She hurries to the kitchen, where her son seems frozen with fear, but not before glancing through a window to see the armoured gate slide back and a dozen men, maybe more, run into the garden, stooping as they run, waving pistols in front of them. She's imagined this happening a thousand times, and seen it on TV, the American programmes the uncles watch while she pretends to be reading. But in her imagination her husband has always been with her, and she has always felt safe because of that. She has a sudden urge to pee. She crosses the kitchen to the boy. Her brother-in-law is useless, the few men helpless against so many. She wishes she had a gun as well. She's furious this should be happening, furious it should have been allowed. You bastards, she says, feeling her voice splinter in her throat. She has done nothing.

The little boy has climbed onto a stool and is staring into the garden, his penguin dangling from his hand.

What do they want? he says. He doesn't seem scared any longer and, for the first time, his mother *is* scared, not for herself, but for her son and for what might become of him. She darts across the room and lifts the boy up.

Come on, darling, she says, the boy resisting and struggling to find the floor with his feet, we need to move. She can hear men's



footsteps around the villa now, and her brother-in-law's raised voice, but he doesn't speak their language any more than she does, assuming these men, so silent, so many, are local. Maybe the uncles can speak for them. The one who does the shopping will know what to say. She must phone her lawyer before her mobile phone is taken away from her.

She's in the hall now, her son wriggling like a puppy in her grasp, saying Put me down! Her brother-in-law calls out to say there are dozens of them, forty, fifty, a whole fucking army. They've surrounded the house. They must be local. No one back home would have dared send so many onto foreign soil. At least that, she thinks, at least they'll not just disappear. You'll pay for this, you bastards.

It's all right, darling. She soothes the boy, letting him slide to the ground in order to free her hands. Everything is fine, she says, catching the penguin as it slips from his grasp. Everything will be fine.

She has never felt at home here, she thinks savagely, hating every over-priced brick of the place, every blade of grass in the poorly tended garden, every plate and fork and spoon in the kitchen, the towels that match but don't really dry, the sheets that tear when they are washed with bleach, but how else will she know they are clean? How else can she be sure? Only two days ago she'd found a cockroach in her bedroom and crushed it beneath her foot. Old habits die hard. She has never felt at home in this place, she tells herself, as the men approach. She can't understand how calm she feels. Do they know she can see them, creeping across the grey, bare lawn? I shall be glad to be gone.

When one walks in, plain clothes, pressed jeans and a nicely fitting shirt, he is wary, his fingers tight on the pistol, his forehead glistening with sweat. He's afraid, she sees that at once. She should be scared by this, a frightened man with a gun, but she senses herself relax, and there it is. Contempt. His weakness is her strength. She is her husband's wife, she tells herself. She will make him proud of her, of them both. She strokes her son's hair. It's time he had it cut, she thinks. The little boy stares at the man as he walks across, gesturing to the woman to stand against the wall with the tip of his pistol. Perhaps if her son weren't here she would call his bluff. He's no more than twenty-two, twenty-three, he's more distressed than she is. He



didn't expect to find me here, she thinks. Not standing here like this, in the middle of breakfast, as if he's about to do me a favour by taking me away. She has her failsafe passport, the diplomatic passport issued in her maiden name, tucked into the side pocket of her bag. What sort of fool do they take her for?

Where's my book? says the boy. I want my book.

She's been in this airless, bare room for hours now, waiting. They began by talking at her, three of them in turns, in their language, which she doesn't understand, or doesn't intend to understand, or doesn't intend to let them know she understands, and not in hers, which she does understand, although it hurts her to speak it these days, as if it carried its taint within itself. It's hers when she talks to her son, she thinks, and only then. She's been reduced by all this – the right word won't come: confusion? horror? inconvenience? – to baby language, the promises and demands and intimate deceits of children. No wonder all she wants to do is cry. Only her pride prevents her. But then, when a woman in a blouse and jeans comes in and, without sitting, asks her for her documents in basic English, her first impulse is to laugh.

You mean you don't know who I am? she says, also in English. Isn't it a little late for that? You should have checked before breaking into my house.

The new woman, her age or younger, looks confused, then irritated. I've rattled her, she thinks. She's not scared yet, which is what they want, but she's sick with worry about her son. They'll treat him properly, surely? They love children here, isn't that what everyone says? You can't go into a restaurant without children running between the tables, turning up their noses at decent food.

Your documents, the woman repeats.

She spreads her hands slowly, holds them open. You already have my documents, she says.

The woman shakes her head. Not those documents, she says. Those documents are false.

Before there is time to answer, and what would be the answer, what answer would satisfy these people, who are supposed to be neu-



tral and are anything but, the woman has left the room. And her son? Thank God he has his penguin. He seemed so small in the car, the tiniest creature, as if he had shrunk suddenly, or gone back in time. Was it fear that did that? All those men, and for what? To capture a mother and her child and a stuffed penguin. She wonders for a moment where the uncles are. For all the good they've done. Still, she can't not worry, for her brother-in-law at least. She can see her husband now, furious, stamping round the room and barking orders to people she's never seen, to get her out of this. She was supposed to be safe. He'll sort things out in the end.

Half an hour later, her lawyer is there, a call was made, but there is nothing she can do. She wants to know why she is being held, but no one will tell her. Her papers, they say, are false, and this is not true, or not entirely, but what is truth any longer? She still hasn't seen her son, although she heard what might have been his voice in the distance, and crying, as if he was being hustled away. She feels physically sick.

Let me see my child, she said, in English, and then, in their language, *my child*. That gave them a shock. They'd been talking about her, in front of her, one of them called her a Russian whore, which would be laughable if she hadn't become hardened to their ignorance; they thought she hadn't understood. How stupid they are. The world is in the hands of the stupid and the evil and the rich. Although she is rich too, she mustn't forget that. Richer than they will ever be. Which is both a source of satisfaction and her only hope. This lawyer, for instance, how much will she want for this? Look at the way she's dressed, as though she's been invited to a film premiere. She wonders who chose her, and why. Her husband? Her brother-in-law? Her skirt is too short. No one will take her seriously. She would like her lawyer to be old and wise.

How much longer is this going on? she says. They have no right to hold me here, you know. My papers are in order. She's about to add, *It was your job to make sure of that*, but the lawyer is rifling through a file of documents, letters, protocolled papers of one kind or another, none of which she has seen before today. This is what it takes,



she thinks, to be safe. This endless accumulation of paper. Words written on the skin of her, over and over again, until she can't be seen. She looks at her wrist, but her watch has been taken away from her. It must be – what? – ten, eleven by now, her son will be starving. If only he'd eaten his cereal. They've taken my watch, and my phone, she says. Is that allowed?

The lawyer looks up. I'm sorry?

They've deprived me of my personal property. I don't even know what time it is.

The lawyer's framing an answer when the door opens and her son runs in. He flings himself at his mother, presses his face into her lap. Oh thank you, she says to no one, to God, but there is no God, to her husband, who may have pulled strings to make this happen. She has to believe in this, the existence of strings. I have done nothing, she says. The lawyer stands up. I will come back, she tells her, in her over-precise laboured English, but her words are wasted. The woman has wrapped the little boy in her arms and is whispering words into his ear in their own language, which reassures her, and is their one safe place and the only home she has, and scares her because it is the language of her persecutors, and there is no escape from it. My precious, she says, stroking her son's hair away from his forehead. My little treasure. Daddy's on his way. But before the boy can do more than snuggle further into his mother the door has opened again and two men lead both mother and child from the room. When she resists, gently at first because she doesn't want her son upset, a third man scoops the boy up and carries him off, and she finds herself following, her arms stretched out to grab the boy back, her words of protest caught in her throat. My husband will never forgive you for this, she wants to say, he is a powerful man and he will make you pay. I have done nothing. But her husband is a thousand miles away and they are marching her now, one man at each elbow, towards a police van, and there is no way back.

The room she's left in this time has a window looking into the main part of the airport. It's the low-cost airport, she travelled through it years ago, before all this started, before she met her hus-



band. The window is high up, it's intended for light only, she supposes, but she can see through it if she stands on tiptoe. She has been here for an hour, maybe more. Still no watch, no phone, but she's stopped expecting to have these back. Her lawyer hasn't shown up. She'll have her sacked, she thinks. Her son is with her, at least that, asleep on a wooden chair, his head resting on the table beside his penguin. He takes it all so calmly, too calmly, as though he knows his life will be like this for ever. Fight back, she urges him, but not out loud. She doesn't want to wake him until they're released. Through the window she can see people waiting for their flights, standing in line or slumped on the hard plastic chairs. A young woman is holding her boyfriend's hand in both hers, staring into his face as he looks away. How cruel we can be to each other, she thinks, as though we lived for ever and will always have time to make everything right. Above their heads, turned slightly towards her, she can see a TV screen. Car advertisements, women in bikinis. Scarlett Johansson in Paris. The wealth of the world. Beneath the images a ribbon of words she can't quite read. And then the ads stop and there is a spinning globe that means news, and the faces of the men who make the news flash up, one after the next, like puppets in a children's show. She watches to see what is happening out there, beyond the glass. There are pictures of floods, of cars being sucked into holes, and people wading through water, and then of a house with police tape over the door and a man talking to the camera.

And then there are two men in expensive suits shaking hands, and she knows them both, the short one with the painted-on hair and the unctuous smile, who used to run this country, and maybe still does, and the other one, who runs her own country, the toad, the torturer, beaming towards the camera as though she is already standing before him. They have reached an agreement, she can see that, an understanding between men of power, and she knows what that understanding is. She crosses the room to the table and presses the penguin to her face. She puts her free hand as gently as she can on her son's sleeping head. My treasure, she says. Oh, Jozef, my only treasure.

Everything will be all right.