

FICTION

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Safe

HER CLOTHES, PILED neatly outside the door, smell of sawdust, bleach and dried urine. The corridor now smells the same. Olivia is oblivious to it, she can no longer smell these things. She keeps her clothes outside the door from habit.

6:48 a.m. She still has two minutes left. The alarm goes off at 6:40 a.m., but she likes to have ten minutes to lie awake in bed. The room is dark, north facing, so it rarely gets any sun. At the height of summer, before the sun drops behind the West Field, a triangle of light falls on the floor beneath the window. This is the only time her room sees the sun. Sometimes, when her day's work is ended, Olivia sits, legs crossed, eyes closed, rocking slightly in the patch of light.

"Dry dust," she whispers, "softly blowing over flat plains, desert plains, stoneless plains. Wind sweeps across, sand coloured grasses sway; and in the distance, nothing, just blue shimmers of space."

The second alarm bell rings. Olivia glances at the postcard on the wall beside her bed. Africa—desert plains, desert sand, her sand. She has forgotten who sent it.

She throws back the covers, an autumn chill rushing into the warm space she had filled. Shy of others in the house, she puts on her dressing-gown before opening the door and grabbing her clothes. She dresses—6:54 a.m.—cleans her teeth and brushes her cropped hair. She cuts it herself, doesn't trust anyone else. And hates the persistent chatter of the village hairdresser: her reflection blushing in the mirror as she answers his questions.

She leaves the house and smiles to herself. Always the first to rise. She walks up the gravel path towards the cattery. "I see you," she whispers, looking across the West Field, through the fire gap in the woods. Briefly she catches a glimpse of the horizon. This is the only place from where she can see it.

"Tomorrow, that's where you'll find me. I'll run fast." She laughs, surprised that she hears herself in the open air. Her voice sounds strange. "Did I say that out loud?" she asks, "And that? Did I?" Now she is really laughing. Today is a great day.

The path rounds the corner and to her right are the kennels. On hearing her footsteps the dogs come rushing out, barking through the wire mesh, pressing their paws against it. Some of them are hoarse, their bark a rasping croak. Others, their heads resting on their paws, lie motionless, numbed by boredom.

A Labrador wags his tail in the kennel in front of her. He whimpers, tips back his head and howls, his front paws padding the concrete beneath him. Olivia walks up to the wire mesh, puts her face against it, level with the dog's panting grin.

"Hssss, Hssss," she whispers aggressively, her mouth snarling, her hands contorted, clawing the mesh, spitting saliva through her teeth. The Labrador steps back and barks furiously. Olivia bangs her hands flat against the wire, the noise of metal on metal vibrating down the line of kennels. The dog runs back into its confined sleeping area. Olivia smiles. She loves this hour of the day. No one is around to see her. It is her "honest hour." How she hates them, horrid, stupid creatures.

The cattery consists of four long blocks, each containing fourteen separate cat kennels. They are small, three feet by three feet, but there is a ledge and a basket for each cat to sleep on. Little light enters and the walls, painted a crude black blue, do little to disperse it. The wood on the doors is rotting and smells damp, and the walls have thin streams of mildew running down them.

Olivia prepares the morning meal. She pours the milk in the right-hand dish, the biscuits in the left, counting them out individually, seventeen each. It has taken time to work this out, weeks of experimenting, and at first she had made mistakes. She is not afraid to admit that, but it has paid off in the end, and perfection is the result.

She levels the milk to the rim and, stacking the dishes on top of each other, enters Block A of the cattery.

Rufus is, as usual, making more noise than anyone else, his child-like miaow wailing behind Door Ten. Olivia is used to it and will not be coaxed into feeding him first. She unlocks Door One, Rosie's door.

"Mummy's here Rosie—breakfast time!" Olivia calls. Rosie emerges from the warmth of her basket, rubbing herself affectionately against Olivia's arm. Rosie is her favourite. She places the food bowl on the floor and then makes her way along the other doors.

Finally Olivia comes to Door Ten where Rufus is still wailing consistently. She laughs as she enters, Rufus rubbing against her legs, gently clawing his way up her trousers.

"Down, my lovely," Olivia smiles tenderly at the small, youthful, tabby cat. "Here you are." She reaches for Rufus's empty plate from the night before. As she does so the tabby playfully grabs her arm, scratching it across the wrist. Olivia whips her hand away. She stands up, slowly, silently, her face expressionless. She breathes in deeply.

Walking into the passageway she takes the label from his door. In her pocket she finds her glasses, a secret she has managed to keep from everyone. She puts them on and looks at the label. There are three marks beside Rufus's name.

She walks back into the cat kennel, Rufus rushing to her feet. In one swift movement she grabs him, lifting him up by the scruff of the neck. She slaps him hard against the face, one, two, three times and then throws him against the sleeping shelf. He hits the wood and then falls onto the floor, landing heavily on his belly.

Olivia takes the empty plate and quietly closes the door. Getting out a pen, she draws another mark beside Rufus's name. He will not be fed for the next week. Olivia wipes the tears from her cheek. She would not tolerate such behaviour.

Before coming to Cruesham Quarantine Kennels she had trained to be a teacher. She had learnt the importance of discipline then. On her final day of teacher-training her class, led by a lout of a boy, had rioted on her and afterwards she had failed the course. You could not punish a child so easily; you had to answer to the parents. The boy had nearly drowned, she had held his head down

for too long. After that the town ostracized her, the mother of the child screaming obscenities before silence was sworn against her. Olivia had learnt a valuable lesson and a hard one at that, but life, after all, was about learning from experience. Discipline was vital for the sake of others. One must not be afraid of being disliked.

Olivia finishes feeding the rest of the cats. She puts the kettle on the stove at 10:02 a.m. and begins washing up.

10:10 a.m. is tea break. The kettle boils, and she makes herself tea. Leaving her mug steaming on the table, she walks out of the cattery and across the lawn to the office. Miss Marny's poodle yaps around her ankles as she enters. Olivia smiles down sweetly at it.

"Hello Twinkles dear," she says.

Miss Marny, the owner of the kennels, sits behind her desk in the office, busying herself with paperwork.

"Ah, Olivia," she says briskly. Olivia loves to hear her name spoken, especially by Miss Marny. She is Italian, so her voice lilts upwards as she pronounces the "I's."

"Rosie leaves us tomorrow, doesn't she?"

"Yes, that's right," says Olivia, hiding her smile with her hand, willing herself not to give away her secret.

"I've had complaints about dirty eyes, so could you make sure they're clean on her departure?" Miss Marny smiles with fake nonchalance as she speaks, encouraging swift action with her tone.

Olivia doesn't reply. Her face is blank. Miss Marny turns around, searching for something in the filing cabinet. Olivia kicks Twinkles.

"Is that all?" she asks, her voice draining out the poodle's whimper.

"Yes, thank you dear."

Olivia's tea will be ready now. She never likes to leave it longer than two minutes to cool. She checks the book for visitors and then leaves.

Once outside she allows herself a small smile of satisfaction. No one suspects. She has kept the secret to herself for a long time now, planning the right moment carefully. Tomorrow is the anniversary of her arrival here. It is apt that this too will be the day of her departure.

She looks across to the West Field. From this angle she cannot see the gap in the forest trees. She feels a shifting in her belly, a sharp tickle that rises up between her ribcage. The moment has almost come, the moment when she will run, head on, brave, towards the horizon.

"Brown lands," she whispers, poetic in the dramatic moment, "Dry lands. I shall walk with you and the ground beneath my feet shall be mine as I step on it."

The new boy who began a week ago is walking towards her. Olivia has not spoken to him yet, despite sharing the same lodgings. She quickens her steps.

"Um Olivia, isn't it?" he calls behind her.

Damn it. "Yes, that's right," she turns, unsmiling.

"I've been told to come and help you."

Oh, why couldn't they leave her alone? She didn't need their help.

"You can clean out Block D then," she says sullenly. "Follow me." She storms into the cattery, not bothering to hide her anger. Her tea will be too cold now. The boy shrugs. He has heard all about Olivia.

She fills two buckets with boiling water and generously pours in bleach. It bubbles, foaming to the top.

In block D she does the first cat herself, showing the boy exactly what he should do.

"I'm not interested in how quickly you get the job done. I prefer it to be done properly or not at all," she says, her tone accusing pre-emptively. She empties out the litter tray, wiping out the soiled sawdust, and then mops down the floor that is wet with urine.

"How long have you worked here?" the boy asks.

"Twenty-one years," she says bluntly.

"Blimey, a long time then," the boy tries to sound impressed.

"Yes."

Olivia finishes, hands the mop to the boy and leaves.

She sets about cleaning the rest of the blocks, taking extra care, knowing that someone else will do them tomorrow. She wants to set a standard for them to follow.

Nearing lunch-hour the boy finds her. He is nervous.

"I'm having a bit of trouble with Rufus." He holds out his arm and shows the long bleeding scratch running along it.

Olivia puts down the mop and follows him back to the block. She can never understand why they allow those with little or no experience to help her in the cattery. It is a complicated job. In Block A she finds Rufus roaming the corridor.

"What's all this, Mister?" she asks, crouching beside the cat. Rufus rubs against her tentatively and then, more bravely, places his front legs in Olivia's lap, clawing to climb into it. Olivia lifts him up and walks to his cat kennel. As she places him on his shelf he turns, jumping suddenly onto her shoulder, hissing loudly. As he does so an extended right claw catches Olivia's cheek, tearing the dry bleached skin deeply.

Seeing the boy watching from the corridor, Olivia places Rufus on the floor calmly.

"Such a silly thing," she says, closing the door behind her, her eyes catching the four marks beside Rufus's name. Five now, she registers.

At 1:00 p.m. Olivia walks down the path to the house. In her room she cleans the scratch on her face. There is a thin line of dry blood running down her cheek, and a stain on her shirt where it has dripped. She makes herself some lunch, her mind preoccupied.

At 1:56 p.m. she walks back up the path, past the endless lines of barking dogs. She passes them silently, keeps her head down, her eyes following the gravel pathway. Someone passes her. She doesn't look up, and no words of greeting are exchanged.

At 2:00 p.m. precisely she enters the cattery. She walks through the kitchen and fills the bath in the washroom. She uses only cold water. Her face is blank.

"Olivia," the boy calls behind her. He startles her and she turns, answering too abruptly.

"What?"

"I've finished."

"Fine, well then leave me alone."

The boy looks confused and Olivia senses she is making irrational mistakes. She smiles, dispersing the atmosphere of aggression.

"Please," she adds. The boy shrugs and leaves.

Olivia reproaches herself. Stupid to be so abrupt. She checks outside and sees the boy walking down the path, swinging his arms, indifferent to her situation.

She enters Block A, marching up the corridor with decision. She counts down the doors, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine and finally Ten. She pulls back the lock and enters. Rufus jumps down from the shelf, rushing to the far right-hand corner. Olivia leans in and picks him up gently. With tenderness she holds him in her arms, rocking him softly back and forth. Rufus relaxes and begins to purr affectionately, happily nuzzling his head into her armpit.

"I love you, Rufus," she whispers. "Truly I do."

She closes the door to Number Ten. The lock squeaks as she pushes it across. She must oil it before she goes. She carries the tabby down the damp, bleach-smelling corridor, through the kitchen and into the washroom. She locks the door behind her. The bath has filled up nicely. Olivia allows herself a moment's praise. After twenty-one years her timing is perfect.

Her self-approbation is short-lived, and she concentrates on the moment in hand. She walks over to the bath, puts her hand in tentatively. The water is cold, but not alarmingly so. It will be fine. She looks at the cat's young face, such a sweet face she considers, her hand caressing the side of its cheek.

"It will be all right lovely, Mummy's here," and with that she plunges the cat into the water. She pushes her arms downwards to the bottom of the bath; doesn't notice that her shirtsleeves go with them. She holds the cat on the bottom easily, despite its persistent squirming, and watches the bubbles rippling on the surface of the water.

"Be still my lovely," she whispers. The cat's small body jerks under her hold, she can feel its tiny ribs beneath her fingers and loosens them, fearful that they may be too tight. The jerks grow weaker, she knows it will not be long now. The bubbles have stopped. The cat quivers, once, twice, and then is still. She can feel its small heart slowing, the beat pacing with her own now, then slower, passing her by, and then all is still.

Olivia relaxes her grip and pulls the cat from the bath. It hangs in front of her, limp, bedraggled and dead. She towels down the excess water and then wraps it up, warm and safe now, the punishment over. Laying it on the table she presses down hard

against its chest, pumping the water from its lungs. It squirts from the cat's mouth, pouring over the table. Olivia is surprised by how much there is.

Afterwards she places the cat in a cardboard box, hiding it in the storeroom; then, unlocking the door, she enters the kitchen and puts the kettle on. Tears fill her eyes and then spill over, running onto the hot metal of the kettle. They evaporate immediately leaving only a small residue of salt behind.

She was at one point prepared to let the matter go, but then that would never do. Her departure would cause enough problems without the added matter of a disobedient cat, and one that was quite unmanageable at that. She had done the right thing, she was sure. It was only the manner in which she had carried out the punishment that irked her slightly. All dead cats were decapitated and their bodies incinerated at the quarantine kennels; something to do with rabies. The head would be taken to the lab for examination, so she generally used other methods, untraceable ones, but they took time and she was all out of time.

The kettle whistles. 3:30 p.m. Tea break.

After tea she carries the dustbin over to the incinerator. It is heavy, full of sawdust, wet with shit and urine. It is difficult to empty. She hates this part of the job. The incinerator is shared with the dog kennels and is heaped high with dog-shit. It burns throughout the day, the smell wafting into the cattery.

The day is passing by quickly; Olivia is surprised at its speed. Normally time is slow for her. Never before has she looked at her watch and found it ticking ahead of her estimation, but today time rushes by, taking her farewell moments with it. She does not want the day to end, but it does, tick-tock, till her watch reads 5:23 p.m.

She must say goodbye now. The evening meal has been given and collected. Most of the cats have eaten well. Olivia is pleased. She collects the box that contains Rufus from the storeroom and carries it to Door Ten. She picks the cat up, still wet, the body now stiff and cold. She places it in the basket, covering it from view. Someone else will find it now.

She passes the doors chanting her goodbyes and then finally she locks up and walks down the path for the very last time.

The gap between the trees comes into view and she sees the sun setting in the far horizon.

"Dust, wild dust," she whispers, "desert dust, blowing like me, free."

Olivia skips slightly, sings a note, ignoring the persistent barking.

"La, La, La," she sings, "La, La," and then turning to the dog kennels, "Hssss and good riddance," she shouts. No one sees her. They have all gone home long ago.

In her room she sits on her bed. There is little packing to be done, but she should do it now. She lies back on the bed, tired. She decides to have a bath first.

In the hot steamy water she sinks down, her face under the surface, her breath tight in her chest. She exhales and surfaces and begins to scrub the soap hard over her dry skin, rubbing it into a white lather. She will be clean forever, rid of that smell she remembers so well: bleach in her pores, stale urine covering her clothes and hands, sawdust, wet and sticking to her. Never again. She is free. She is finally leaving.

6:40 a.m. the alarm goes off. Olivia wakes, lies in bed for the remaining ten minutes, stretching in the warmth under the covers. 6:50 a.m., the second alarm rings out. Olivia gets up, grabs her dressing-gown and reaches for her clothes outside the door. She dresses, cleans her teeth and brushes her cropped hair.

The dogs begin to bark as she walks up the path. She ignores them and reaches the cattery. She unlocks the gate and, in the kitchen, prepares breakfast: seventeen biscuits in the right-hand dish, milk in the left. Stacking them on top of each other she enters Block A and passing down the doors, collects the old dishes and delivers the new.

She enters Door Ten. Rufus does not come out to greet her. That's strange, she thinks, and lifts the covers from his basket. The smell, an unknown smell, hits her, rank, like stale cabbage. She sees Rufus, stiff and still, lying in his basket. Her hand reaches out, strokes the fur. It is wet, decomposing. She whips her hand away and suddenly she remembers.

"I'm not meant to be here," she whispers, "I drowned him because I'm meant to have gone. I'm meant to be free." She leans against the wall, heaving convulsively, suddenly defeated, con-

fused. Her breath is fast and frightening. These emotions are strange to her. She does not know them.

"It's all right Livi," she whispers, "It's all right. You'll go tomorrow, yes, tomorrow you shall leave." She feels herself calming, her breath slowing. It doesn't matter, she tells herself. Remember, no one knows. It makes no difference to them and tomorrow will be fine. Tomorrow she will go.

She walks into the kitchen and puts the kettle on. Tomorrow is her day off she remembers. She can't go then. That would be silly, to leave on a day that is already free. Well the next day then. Yes, Friday, Friday she will leave. The kettle boils and she pours her tea. She leaves it on the table and walks across the path to the office.

The boy is standing by the desk with a cat basket.

"Yes, go and get her then, Mark," Miss Marny is saying to him. He leaves, shuffling past Olivia, diverting his eyes.

"Ah Olivia, he's gone to get Rosie. She's leaving now."

Olivia is silent. Oh yes, she remembers, we were meant to leave together. The boy returns and Olivia sees Rosie's face through the mesh of the basket. She is miaowing, scratching at the metal. Olivia extends her hand and touches a paw, the fur soft beneath her dry, bleached skin.

"Olivia, can you swap with Lisa next week, do Saturday?" asks Miss Marny.

"Yes," Olivia says quietly and then she turns and leaves the office. She walks along the gravel path. Well, maybe Sunday then, Sunday I shall go, or Monday, start the week afresh. She walks into Block A, wondering what she will do about Rufus's body. She cannot see the gap in the trees from the cattery. She cannot see the horizon.