

Pre-determination

by Alison Wells

Have you ever watched an ant crawling across the floor? Of course you have. Did you wonder where it was going to end up? Did you wait for it to find that crumb or sugar crystal and pick it up in its paws or its mouth or whatever it uses. Then did you amuse yourself by watching it carry the thing all the way back across the Saharan laminate flooring of the living room, out across the white Arctic glare of the kitchen tiles to the back door, over the little rim that seals the door when it closes, down the other side. Only to step on the thing, grind him into the ground just before he makes it back to his nest, sits down, puts his feet up, tucks into his hard earned tucker. I didn't even wipe him off my shoe.

Last week my mother phoned to say that my father had died. I haven't told anyone yet, although the funeral is tomorrow and I'll have to take the day off.

I work in a call centre but it's okay — don't feel too bad about it — because I'm the team leader, not one of the treadmill rats. I get to get up out of my seat every so often and walk round the partitions. I get to have *meetings*. I meet people there, at least they are sort of people-like, they say lots of makey uppy things like quotient and call to kill ratio. They keep straight faces in front of the management and then they forage in secret at the water cooler, feral, digging and nosing each other, making frantic signals as their time runs out.

When I was nine the teacher thought I would be a vet. She told my parents that I had an affinity for animals. I felt pleasure. It wasn't very often someone said something good. Afterwards I thought maybe she thought I was dumb like them. She never saw me pull the wings off live flies or throw wood lice in the fire just to see them shrivel, drown a beetle in a stream of warm pee.

At the water cooler they talk about that guy who got manslaughter for killing his girlfriend although the prosecution thought they had it sewn up. I crush the polystyrene cup and let it fall to the floor. I think I'll phone in sick tomorrow.

Back at my desk I figure out why was it manslaughter not murder. Because even though he did her in with a screwdriver, they discovered some beautifully crafted shelves he'd recently made and put up for her. She was a lover of books they said, although their tastes differed. He read Westerns, she read true life drama. She never saw it coming. The guy's name was Anthony. If it had been Anto, he would have gone down for life. He shaved years off his sentence by using a lathe and not shaving his head.

My father used to have one of those old fashioned razors. I cut my finger on it once, wrote my name in blood on the mirror. He used to joke that he was part of the Slow Shaving movement. He liked to savour his experiences: shaving, drinking — one pint in the pub all evening, dinner — saving the best bits of meat and gravy to the last. He said he added years to his life that way.

But the funny thing is, my father always knew that death was out to get him: lurking in the back of lorries with the defrosting chickens, at the bottom of cigarette packets, or on the front grille of a bus. You'd wonder if he drew attention to himself that way, by always making a thing of it — as if death was a wasp just waiting for somewhere sweet to land. When I was a kid I used to make decoys: barley squash swimming pools for the wasp to land in — anywhere but me. My father died anyway. Of nothing much.

He used to say when it was time, it was time and there wasn't much point in arguing about it. He folded his newspaper and put it on the side of the armchair every night. Unlike my mother, who begged for obedience, he loved me firmly. He called me son. Always. I wondered if he knew my name. I didn't call him anything.

But the name is the hook in the call centre, get it and you're half way there. So when this new girl comes in, not sassy — we never get any of those ponies in here — I lean in over the partition and introduced myself and I say her name, not once, not twice but whenever I can. Margaret, Margaret the mouse with the small head, the tied back hair and the bit that always slips, the bit she pulls at when she's anxious and her skin so pale, the colour of separated milk and the freckles not a blessing. I aim to be her friend. And she

waits at the bus stop in the evening, the one at the cold corner where the wind whips and she wore that skirt, grey cotton to look professional but she's just sad, those small eyes shuttling all the while. She bites her lip. She would look magnificent in red. I picture us in the summer in the park, all laughter, municipal blooms behind our heads in a snapshot. I know where she lives from her file. When she gets off the bus I am there. She buys bread and milk at the corner shop and her feet in her flimsy court shoes are wet from the rain, her handbag slips on her shoulder and the bag twists round her fingers. It's a struggle. I watch her make her way along the splattered street, across the precarious road, up six steps and over the rim of the communal front door. She will want to put her feet up. I cross the street with my hammer, wondering if she likes to read.

