

If I'm honest

by C.J.F

When you kicked me out, me and Sandra shacked up together. There wasn't much else to do. We lived in a Holiday Inn trying not to be depressed that life had turned out to be so much like Eastenders, trying not to acknowledge that the thrill we'd got out of each other was the thrill of giving in to the wrong thing. We had more sex than ever but it wasn't the same. We never talked about it but we both knew; bones can tell each other things that mouths can't.

After a week in room 68 Sandra sat me down and told me she was going back to her husband, that they were going to give it another go, but that this had really meant something, that she'd miss me... I held her hand and nodded but I knew it wasn't true. She was just a woman who had looked more appealing than you once and I was just a man who'd made her feel attractive.

You put on weight after we were married. I didn't blame you, you'd had three kids and had never been one for exercise. I didn't even mind to be honest, you looked okay big but the real reason I didn't mind was because I knew that here was my excuse.

You see, *you* didn't feel attractive anymore. Even when I stroked and stroked your back desperate for you to roll over or climb on top of me, you were rigid as the headboard. You couldn't believe I wanted to shag you, and the truth was, in the end, if I'm honest, I was glad, because underneath the hurt pride and disappointment I thought at least now I can have an affair.

Our light hearted dreams of having our own little family drained you of your fire, Cath. You became the thing you'd always feared: a baby factory, cooer, a matron. Motherhood took you over completely, even your dreams. There was no room for me. You'd wake up sweating from nightmares: Hannah being kidnapped from school... Nathan being mauled by a tiger... Lucy getting dragged out to sea... And I'd hold you, my eyes still half closed, and I'd say, There, there

Cath, it's okay... They're safe... We're all safe... I'm here... And I meant it, but really, I just wanted to get back to sleep.

And in the morning I'd get up, put my new suit on, eat the breakfast you'd made me and daydream about Sandra. Because by the time Hannah was one I'd already started up with her. Lucy, would be sitting on my knee, humming and eating toast and I'd be imagining turning Sandra over so her pale arse stuck up in the air just for me.

And all the time, people would have said: Terry? Oh yeah, his family are everything to him.

And they were. You are.

You used to kiss me as I left for work, keeping up your end of our joint effort to stay blind to what was happening to us. I'd feel mildly disgusted as your marmite lips kissed my cheek; partly with you and partly with myself for making you that way, because I felt responsible. Insisting that I wanted one more child. And one more. A trio! I used to say, one and a half each! And you'd smile, but you'd be less light hearted than me because you still had the scars from the last time.

Then one day our act collapsed. You got a phone call. A young man's voice saying, "Terry Beckett is having an affair. Ask him who Cassandra Worthy is or ring 395716."

Then the phone went dead. Beeeeeep. You did the beep when you told me, do you remember, Cathy? That's what you said word for word. "Then the phone went dead. Beeeeeep." And I looked at you, eyes wild in a face blank like a digestive biscuit and I thought you'd gone mad. For a minute I thought you were never going to stop with that beep and then you stopped and I realised that only a second had passed and maybe it was me that was mad because what was I going to do now and was I going to be able to see the kids and who was Sandra to me anyway?

Because I knew what I'd lost straight away. I could tell by the way you looked at me. Your eyes were blank, our history gone just like that.

I've always had bad thoughts, Cathy. Since what happened I've been looking back, trying to understand where it came from and I realised it didn't come from anywhere, it was there all along.

When I was a teenager I used to have an elderly friend, I knew her from the bakery where I did my apprenticeship and I started going round to see her sometimes because it was obvious she was lonely. A nice thing to do. But the thing was, what I remember now, is that even as I sat across from her talking I'd imagine scenarios where I found her pin number and stole her bank card, or tied her up and nicked her antiques. I didn't want to do it but the thoughts just kept coming. I used to wonder if there was something wrong with me because I could think these things so easily at the same time as I smiled and dunked another custard cream.

Even when my actions were good my thoughts couldn't match up. And recently, with the way things have turned out, I've started to wonder, which bit was the real me?

After I'd gone you started getting your life back. You got a job in a solicitor's, joined a gym, lost all the weight, but you weren't the same. My mum kept me informed, thinking it was my fault we hadn't made up. She tried to goad me into wanting you back not realising how I already ached for it, how many times you'd shut the door on me in my best suit. She'd tell me off for being drunk, tell me I'd never be allowed to see the kids at this rate, and I'd put the phone down and drink even more. It was more than I could take, Cath.

It was Mum that told me about Simon.

I couldn't bear him getting close to you, you falling in love. You were still mine Cathy! I couldn't bear him living with *our* kids. I sat up at night thinking of ways I could stop it and there were thousands, too many, the pictures kept on coming, but I couldn't go through with it. It was wrong, I knew that. But you wouldn't talk to me or let me near the kids and I was holed up in that Holiday Inn, missing work and drinking, losing whole days... I was out of control,

my mind coming up with ways to stop him getting any closer, ways of getting you to listen and after a while... they didn't seem so farfetched.

It wasn't planned, not properly, but that night I knew the kids were out because my mum had them and I knew he'd taken you to the theatre because my mum had told me. She'd given me the usual phone call but this time I hadn't turned to drink. I'd put my vodka down for once, lay back on my single bed and stared at the ceiling as the kaleidoscope of thoughts came. I don't remember making a decision but I remember a sentence going round and round my head, you've got nothing to lose, you've got nothing to lose, you've got nothing to lose, and then it was like being part of a machine, like being strapped into the passenger seat of something much bigger than me.

You probably don't want to read this but I need to write it, I need to understand for myself. Anyway, you won't have read this far. This will be ashes by now.

That night, I walked to our house. I let myself in. I sat by our bed and I waited, knife in my pocket. I heard a taxi pull up outside, heard you struggling to find your keys, the telltale sound of too much drink as you missed the keyhole, and his laugh, low, as you walked inside.

I stood up, thinking there's no way out now, Terry, you've just got to get on with it, mate. And so I began acting out the images. It seemed like the tiniest step. I knocked the bedside lamp over and trod heavily to the door, waited behind it. Your voices stopped downstairs and I felt you freeze like I was freezing, felt the truth travel through my skeleton that the bad thing I'd always been ready for was about to happen.

Simon crept up the stairs. He walked as lightly as a six foot man can walk until he was a metre away from me. My heart slammed against my chest but my hand, ready with the lamp in it, was steady, and when he pushed the door open, testing, I stayed where I was, waiting for the seconds to pass until he would cross the threshold

and I could hit him. I'd imagined it so many times before. It was unstoppable, Cathy, like fate. Three seconds and I'd struck so fast he didn't have a chance to use the rolling pin he was holding. The thump of him falling to the ground must have terrified you. I think about that now. But then I just thought I can't have much time, I'd better get on with it, and I picked him up, dragged him into the room then climbed out the window and over Abe's hedge.

It seems crazy now, of course it does, but I wasn't myself Cathy. What I said in court was true. I can only piece it together now, but mostly, what I remember was that I just wanted to talk to you.

You were on the drive, routing through your bag when I walked up.

I put on a slur, said I had to talk to you.

You were so frightened that you didn't tell me to go away. I walked straight in the door. You followed, not wanting to be left by yourself and I could hear your breathing, more like panting and I thought of you red faced and sweating, giving birth to Hannah, the way you'd fixed your eyes on me like I was the only thing worth focusing on in the world and I slowed down then, starting to be afraid of what I'd done, and you mistook my slowness for uncertainty, told me he was in your room.

Things got hazy now you were there. I'd lost sight of the plan. I wondered if I couldn't just stage a rescue, phone the police even, but I didn't know if he'd seen me when I hit him, and you were right there waiting for me to do something and then we were in the bedroom and you saw that he was unconscious on the floor, that the window was open. You turned to me and I saw you wondering what the hell was I doing there anyway?

"I just wanted to talk to you, Cathy," I said.

And you looked back and forth like an animal trying to understand.

"Something's got to give, you see..."

I sounded calm but Simon was coming round and I couldn't remember what I'd planned to do. Blood was running down one side

of his head, making everything seem worse than it was and I could see you waking up, that long-cold fire making its way back to burning point and I was so happy to see it again but I needed to think of something quick and I started babbling.

"Heads bleed a lot, Cathy, don't worry, it's because the skin's so thin there... remember when Nath cut his head open...?"

You were raging, shouting at me, calling me a psycho, realising what I'd done, but I couldn't stop talking. I had so much to say.

"I made a mistake, Cathy, I did, but it was always you. Let me talk to you..."

Simon groaned and my stomach dropped at the thought of this moment being over, now, when you'd just got your fire back, when I was just getting to talk. I couldn't bear the idea of his voice joining in and before he could open his eyes, I bent down and stuck my fingers in his mouth. I grabbed at his slippery tongue and I cut and then you shrieked and he started wailing and I couldn't remember what I'd wanted to say. Blood bubbled out of his mouth, his eyes wide, red running down his chin onto his shirt.

You had phoned the police and the ambulance by now, were kneeling by Simon, trying to hold his lolling head forward so he wouldn't swallow all that blood. He was quiet again, unconscious maybe. The room was strangely peaceful and I lay down on our old bed, the pillow soft against my head and smelling of you and I wondered if I could fall asleep.

And now, looking back, what I wonder is, were all the good bits undone in that moment, Cathy?

