

She Could Have Given Him Strawberries

by T. M. Upchurch

She stares at the door. Why *now*?

Ten years ago she could have recovered... could've found a new lover, back-along when she was young enough to grow fat and burst with babies. She could have galloped with the screaming mums in pursuit of that serene look; the one when the kids are pink and cherubic, snug tight in their jammies with cartoon duvets tucked under their chins... She could've licked chocolate kisses from her hands and pressed her nose into their bellies until their laughter turned hiccuppy. Could've watched them grow past her shoulders, big enough to make the tea while she watched *Corrie* and pruned her memories into anecdotes, '*Mine always went to bed on time*'.

She could've had that.

Or he could have stayed. It wouldn't have bloody hurt him; just a day here and there, a season, a where-did-the-summer-go of ripened fruit and sleepy wasps walking into winter, to be found later, balled into finality behind the curtains. He could have let her see out their pub years with the sheen of coupledness, laughing over Shiraz and Black Forest gateaux; *we must cut down, oh we must, ha ha, lovely to see you both*.

It wasn't as if she'd ever stopped him going out alone. She never asked... just did his laundry, mopped his bathroom pools and waited for the gravel to crunch. How could living with her be worse than living with a shadowed chin and microwave meatballs for one? She could have given him strawberries.

She should have done.

And he should've bought a hammock instead of hedge clippers. They could've written it on the kitchen board, under 'toilet roll': strawberries, hammock, beer, hugs... She should've realised that he wasn't good at lists.

She turns to the mirror, runs a fingertip down her face. The skin moves, drawing her eyelid down, stretching freckles over her cheekbones and pulling her mouth into a one-sided mock-smile. She lets go and it slides back too slowly. Behind her reflection, beech fronds flutter around the window and she realises, she doesn't know how to trim a hedge.

She looks at the door again. This time, she pulls up a chair.

