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opening extract from

Turbulence

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One

No one much liked the idea of my paper round but no one argued – much. When you can look one parent in the eye and the other in the eyebrow, arguments are carried out on a more equal footing than when you are down at shoulder lever whining, 'It's not fair.'

'Might as well go out with a banner: "Abduct Me",' Gran said. Even Mr Mirza at the newsagent's was a bit doubtful when I went in about his advert. He is very protective, but the Mirzas had only just taken over the shop and were anxious to hang on to their customers. Mr Mirza barely comes up to my ear. I soon convinced him.

Mum said, 'What about the dark winter mornings?'

I love the dark winter mornings. They remind me how far north this country is. In Canada, at our latitude, they practically have polar bears raiding the dustbins. I love the fact that even with British Summer

Time you can't hold back the darkness indefinitely, any more than you can stop the tides. I love the stillness, even so near the centre of town, although that doesn't last long. It's amazing how many people are already about when the shop opens at six am, milkmen, postmen, joggers – especially the lumpy ones who don't want to be seen in daylight, the early buses all brightly lit and roaring down the main road, picking up people going to work, heading for the station. However cold and wet and tired and fed up you are it must be a cheering moment when that first bus comes into sight.

By the time I get back to the shop the binmen are on the road, followed by the recycling truck, all clangour and flashing lights, and the paper boys – who are younger and punier than me – are just arriving to collect their bags. We're a class of society on our own, an elite, I like to think, people who operate on a different timescale from the rest of the population; not just morning people, dawn people. (Sandor was a morning person except when he was being an evening person. It depended upon who he was talking to.) We see the world from another perspective, almost another plane. We are the ones making things happen, getting things going, not

movers and shakers, *deliverers*. We are the day's midwives, I thought once, coasting down Addington Road; the first line of a poem. Fortunately it never went any further. I had been thinking of a real poem, by John Donne: ' 'Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's,' because it happened to be the morning of the year's midnight, the shortest day, although the mornings don't start getting lighter till after the New Year. You notice that kind of thing when you're out before sunrise.

The best thing about the paper round though, apart from the money, was that I could be certain of being out of the house while everyone else was getting up.

I chained my bike to our railings which somehow escaped being melted down to make tanks during World War II and have spearheads on them. The house is old enough to have what estate agents describe as 'original features', such as draughts. Our original feature is the railings. As I went in Mum called out, 'Is that you, Clay?'

Who else would it be, crashing in just as everyone else was crawling out? 'Yes, it's me, Clay.' Clare, actually, but when I was little I pronounced it Clay,

and it stuck, which was fine because unlike most baby names it is much tougher than the real one. Clay Winchester (after whom they named the repeating rifle that won the West, the Winchester 73) rides into town, out of the desert, hitches Ol' Betsey to the rail outside the saloon on Main Street and moseys on down to the OK Corral for a shoot-out with the Clantons. Eat your heart out, Wyatt Earp, Clay Winchester was there first, blowing the smoke from her pearl-handled Colts by the time you and your brothers and Doc Holliday got your sorry asses into gear. Clay rides shotgun on the Deadwood Stage. That Winchester dame can knock the pip out of an ace at one hundred paces and never plays poker with her back to an open door. Out here in the badlands we all know what happened to James Butler Hickok, Wild Bill to his friends and foes. I knew him well.

Etcetera. Somewhere in the upper branches of the family tree sits a gorilla, that's my theory. Most of the relatives are clearly descended from lemurs and marmosets, but now and again one of us turns out heavy and big-boned and powerful. In this generation, I got the gorilla gene.

Mum – one of the marmosets – was in the kitchen. The days when we could look each other in the eye

were long gone. Now she was scurrying round my ankles.

'Couldn't you have brought the milk in?'

The milkman hadn't arrived when I went out, we're on the end of his route. See, I know about things like that. 'There's none on the step.'

'Someone's nicked it again.' She sighed and wrote 'milk' on the board by the door. We do go through the motions of being organized. 'Can you get some on the way home in case I forget?'

This is not a rough neighbourhood but some of the houses are occupied by students and other opportunists. Our milk thief was a regular like the window cleaner, and, to give him his due, he seemed to share his thieving out fairly. We only lost ours about once a month.

'Is there enough for cornflakes?' I looked in the fridge. There wasn't. 'I'll borrow some of Dad's.'

'If you want to drink cottage cheese. It's probably been there for days. I'll put some toast on.'

'I'll do it, you go and get ready. I'll see if Dad needs anything else and shop on my way home.'

'Yes, *you* won't forget,' Mum said. Marmosets have big wistful eyes. Reliable Clay the Gorilla nodded reassuringly and shooed her out. I heard her going

upstairs and then there was a scrum on the landing as someone, probably a grandmother, tried to get into the bathroom at the same moment. I put the toast on hold and went down the garden to the studio where Dad, the other morning Winchester, would already be getting stuck in to a day's work.

He wasn't, in fact, doing anything of the sort, but like me he got the hell out before anyone else started blundering around, moving at lightning speed: loo, shower, shave, down to the studio before the mist had cleared from the bathroom mirror.

We never called it a shed; Sandor did. When Gran moved in with us Dad invested in a big, sturdy wooden outbuilding, properly wired for computer, lights and heat, and cleared out the room he used as a studio to make room for Gran. We called the new building the studio because that's what it was. Even though it was at the end of the garden by the vegetables, we didn't think of it as a shed. Dad has a microwave and a little fridge in there, and coffee things, so that he doesn't have to break off work and come up to the house when he needs refuelling, but he never remembers to put the milk away at night, hence Mum's crack about the cottage cheese.

It is on a proper hard standing – he'd had to get planning permission for it – with steps up to the door. When I went in he was standing with his coffee mug, staring up the garden through the window over his desk. It was the best view of the garden then – you couldn't see the studio, although the Russian vine has covered it now.

'Do you want anything in town?' I said. 'And go easy on the milk. Dairy Man has been at work again.'

'He must watch our every move,' Dad said. 'He must know what time you go out and then sneak from his lair and make a dash for the doorstep as soon as the milkman's been. If we put our minds to it we could probably catch the bugger.'

'He won't be round again till Easter,' I said, 'if my suspicions are correct.'

'He's affected by the full moon?'

'No, he just steals from different doorsteps each time. I checked with the Gardiners at 37. They lose theirs four days after we do but Mrs G says he never takes the cranberry juice. He must have an allergy – and don't say anything to Mum about him watching my movements. She'll start worrying it's me he's after.'

'Good point; the optimistic fool.' The Mac started yattering to itself. Dad turned to it.

'Do you need anything?'

'No – hey, don't we have company this evening? Aren't I supposed to be going to Sainsbury's?'

'It's Thursday. Mum's got people coming tomorrow.' Dad too has a board by the door. I wrote, 'Friday – TOMORROW! – Sainsbury's.' Necessary for a man who does not know what day of the week it is. Later I would erase 'MORROW' and substitute 'DAY'. 'See you tonight.'

He was bending over the keyboard already.

'Have a good day – watch out for the Canadians.'

The house is a VHS-free zone; DVD rules. When the state-of-the-art integrated digital system was installed the old video recorder went down to the shed – studio – with the old telly. In the back room we watch shiny new movies on the shiny new flat screen. In the studio Dad and I have our collection of Westerns, mostly black and white, and minority movies. We call them that because they are watched by a minority, me and Dad. Half the time no one else has ever heard of them, much less seen them. We have an acid test for new friends – or rather, new acquaintances; they only become true friends if they pass it. We ask if they've seen something we really

like, and if they have, they're half-way in. If they're prepared to give it a try that's a good sign. If they enjoy it, they're one of us.

Or rather, we pretend that this is what we'd do. 'Think he's up for *Ulysses' Gaze*?' Dad mutters (we haven't yet met anyone else who's seen it) or I'll give the once-over to some woman Gran's brought home. 'How about *Nosferatu*, the original, not the remake?'

Dad likes to create improbable double-bills on one cassette: *The Wizard of Oz* and *Aguirre, Wrath of God* or, my favourite, *The Railway Children* and *McCabe and Mrs Miller* which is about two people running a brothel.

One on its own, because we haven't found anything worthy to pair with it, is a Canadian film called *Careful* which Dad taped off Channel 4, years ago. It is about people living in fear of an avalanche and is seriously weird, being set on a mountain and apparently shot in somebody's house, possibly under the stairs.

'All Canadian movies are weird,' Dad said. 'Look at David Cronenberg. It's part of the plot.'

'What plot?'

'People think Canadians are boring mainly, as far as I can see, because singly and collectively they kill very

few of each other or anyone else. This is a ruse. Because they seem dull no one notices what they are really doing, which is planning to take over the world. Who shot JFK?'

'Who did?'

'Obvious, isn't it?'

After that, when anyone came up with a really crazy conspiracy theory, we knew the truth. President Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, the Twin Towers, Princess Diana . . . Dad and I would look at each other significantly.

'Canadians.'

The last job of the morning before school was making sure that everyone was out of the house. In summer this was a simple matter of counting bicycles but it was cold that day and looked like rain. There were still two bikes as well as mine, chained to the railings; Rosie's and Jamie's. They might have decided to get the bus to school, being weedy marmosets, but it was quite likely that Rosie was still buffing her nails and selecting lip gloss for the Barbie lookalike contest which was Year Six at Grosvenor Road. If Jamie wasn't off the premises he might have gone to sleep again. When I looked round his door the curtains were still

drawn but the duvet was on the floor and he wasn't under it. I kicked it to make sure, and opened the transom to get a bit of oxygen into the room, a strange colourless gas, unknown to Jamie.

Rosie passed me as I came out, heading for the stairs, and looking over the landing banister I saw Jamie ambling along the hall like one of those dozy bumblebees that have OD'd on pollen and can't get airborne. They were both going to be late whether they cycled or caught a bus, but that wasn't my problem. Teachers at school were very good about not asking me why James – which he had taken to spelling Jamze in the interests of cool – was such a waste of precious resources, let alone space. Think how much he was contributing to the depletion of the ozone layer just by farting.

'It's his age,' Mum said helplessly, muttering about hormones.

'Were you like that at fourteen?' I asked Dad once.

'I was at work at his age,' Dad said. 'We didn't have hormones, we had the print unions.'

We know two kinds of people, the ones we make an effort for and the ones who'd be surprised if we did. The second sort are the friends who go back years with

Mum and Dad, who turn up carrying bottles, and at some point in the evening one of us remembers to put the oven on and food appears. Last one standing locks up. I've usually bailed out by eleven on account of the paper round. Jamze probably will not show up at all and Rosie will stick around long enough to be noticed before zipping upstairs again to get on with texting friends she can practically see from the bedroom window. Rosie's method of getting noticed is to start a row with somebody older and bigger (all of us) so she can retire in tears leaving us looking like big heartless bullies. We are supposed to feel guilty but this doesn't happen very often.

When we are making an effort most of the effort goes into ensuring that neither of them puts in an appearance and then working out which of the ones who are left actually want to be there. It's a tight squeeze with more than six around the table for a sit-down meal, so anyone who would really, truly prefer to be somewhere else is never pressured into staying.

Gran only ever asks one question: 'Do they play bridge?' If the answer is yes she is off like a shot having once gone on holiday on the Isle of Wight and been trapped for a week among bridge players who

converted Grandad and turned him into a bridge bore overnight.

'The marriage survived but he was never the same again,' she tells people mournfully.

Gran does not know about our Canadian theory, she has one of her own. 'Bridge players are a species of vampire. Once bitten by a vampire you become one too. Bridge players will not rest until the whole world has been bitten. They are the undead. And look at *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Everyone thinks that was a metaphor for the Red Menace, commie infiltration. No it wasn't. It was a subconscious fear of bridge players.'

The ones coming on Friday night were the Iversons, whom we'd known for ever, and some people Mum had met at work who were new to the area. She wanted to make them feel welcome, help them make friends:

Gran: Bridge players?

Mum: I don't know.

Gran: Then they aren't. If they were you'd know all about it, every hand they'd ever played. Opening bids going back to 1960.

Mum: I don't think he does. She might.

Gran: It'll be both or neither. Otherwise one would have murdered the other by now. I'll give it a whirl.

Mum: (Mentally counting place settings and calculating elbow room – literally) You don't have to.

Gran: If you want me to go out, why not say so? I can walk the streets till midnight. I don't suppose anyone will molest me but you can imagine the headlines, can't you? 'Widow ejected from dinner party. Left to die.' The local rag will have a field day: 'Frail grandmother, Marina Morton, 63, was found huddled in a windswept doorway in the early hours of Saturday morning. Friends told the *Courier*, "Marina always dreaded being a burden to her family. She lived on twigs . . ." '

Mum: If you're going to give anything a whirl, why not a noose? Tie it to the attic banisters – it's a good six-metre drop.

Gran: I'm leaving everything to the rehab centre, you know that. And there's a codicil in my will: 'If I'm found dead in suspicious circumstances, arrest my daughter.'

I left them to it and went to lay the table. It was six thirty – pm – and everyone had finally woken up. Sometimes, in the mornings, not a word is exchanged while they all stagger around blearily and only notice each other if someone forgets to lock the bathroom door. This is what I miss by leaving for Mirzas' before anyone else is up. There would be eight for dinner, Mum, Dad, me, Gran – who far from frail is another gorilla – John and Penny Iverson and the New Couple. I hadn't got around to asking who they were yet, but I hoped they were thin.

The room looked nice. The folding glass doors between front and back had been opened, the fire was lit, the curtains drawn. Gran had vacuumed as soon as she got home and all the debris had been cleared away. There is a seat that lifts up in the front bay window. It's understood that if we've got people coming round who it's worth tidying up for, anything that isn't removed before Gran gets the hoover out goes into the window seat. When the seat won't close, we have a clear out.

Dad had done the Sainsbury's run and remembered to bring home cut flowers. All that needed doing now was to get Jamze and Rosie sorted before seven o'clock, then we could all take turns at a lightning shower or

bath so as to be clean and ready when the guests arrived, sitting around beaming, the perfect family. We wouldn't have bothered to do perfect for John and Penny, this was all in aid of Mr and Mrs New. I thought I'd better nip down the garden and weed Dad out of the studio so that he'd be on the starting blocks when it was his turn for the bathroom.

He was closing down for the night when I went in.

'Who are these people?' he said; not that he minded who they were, it just hadn't occurred to him to ask before.

'He started work at DDI last month. She's his partner, I suppose; wife.'

'Names?'

'Dunno. Mum may remember to tell us before they get here.'

'Hasn't she told you?'

'She might have done. It didn't stick.'

It wasn't that we didn't care, but in a house where everyone was always rushing off in different directions it was often difficult to remember who had been told what. Gran had promised, 'When I retire I'll stay at home all day and become the tranquil heart of the household. I shall sit by the window in what will be known as Grandmother's Chair – when it stands

reproachfully empty for the last time – and you will all come to me with your little joys and sorrows.'

'When you retire,' Mum said, 'you'll take to absinthe and spend all day watching *I Married a Slime Mould* and *Zombie Dawn* and I'll have to clear up your roaches.'

Dad and I do not entirely share Gran's taste in cinema but her collection, like ours, has been mainly taped off late-night television so it has to be watched in the studio. She wanders in with a video, when she knows Dad is finishing work:

Gran: You don't mind do you, Roj?

Dad: Feel free. Would I be interested?

Gran: I don't think so, it's *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Wolf Man*.

Dad: (Scanning our library) We've got *Night of the Living Dead*.

Gran: Yes, but yours is paired with *Dumbo*. I don't want to be moved to tears. At the end of a long day I crave blood and guts.

Dad: Would you like me to get you *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for Christmas?

Gran: Kid's stuff. No thank you, I like my viscera unravelled with a bit of finesse.