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Opening Extract from...

The Radleys

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FRIDAY

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Your instincts are wrong. Animals rely on instincts for their daily survival, but we are not beasts. We are not lions or sharks or vultures. We are civilised and civilisation only works if instincts are suppressed. So, do your bit for society and ignore those dark desires inside you.

The Abstainer's Handbook (second edition), p.54

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17 Orchard Lane

It is a quiet place, especially at night.

Too quiet, you'd be entitled to think, for any kind of monster to live among its pretty, tree-shaded lanes.

Indeed, at three o'clock in the morning in the village of Bishopthorpe, it is easy to believe the lie indulged in by its residents – that it is a place for good and quiet people to live good and quiet lives.

At this hour, the only sounds to be heard are those made by nature itself. The hoot of an owl, the faraway bark of a dog or, on a breezy night like this one, the wind's obscure whisper through the sycamore trees. Even if you stood on the main street, right outside the fancy-dress shop or the pub or the Hungry Gannet delicatessen, you wouldn't often hear any traffic, or be able to see the abusive graffiti that decorates the former post office (though the word FREAK might just be legible if you strain your eyes).

Away from the main street, on somewhere like Orchard Lane, if you took a nocturnal stroll past the detached period homes lived in by solicitors and doctors and project managers, you would find all their lights off and curtains drawn, secluding them from the night. Or you would until you reached number 17, where you'd notice the glow from an upstairs window filtering through the curtains.

And if you stopped, sucked in that cool and consoling fresh night air, you would at first see that number 17 is a house otherwise in tune with those around it. Maybe not quite as grand as its closest neighbour, number 19, with its wide driveway and elegant Regency features, but still one that holds its own.

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It is a house that looks and feels precisely how a village family home should look – not too big, but big enough, with nothing out of place or jarring on the eye. A dream house in many ways, as estate agents would tell you, and certainly perfect to raise children.

But after a moment you'd notice there is something not right about it. No, maybe 'notice' is too strong. Perhaps you wouldn't actively realise that even nature seems to be quieter around this house, that you can't hear any birds or anything else at all. Yet there might be an instinctive sense that would make you wonder about that glowing light, and feel a coldness that doesn't come from the night air.

If that feeling grew, it might become a fear that would make you want to leave the scene and run away, but you probably wouldn't. You would observe the nice house and the people carrier parked outside and think that this is the property of perfectly normal human beings who pose no threat to the outside world.

If you let yourself think this, you would be wrong. For 17 Orchard Lane is the home of the Radleys and, despite their very best efforts, they are anything but normal.

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The Spare Bedroom

'You need sleep,' he tells himself, but it is no good.

The light on at three o'clock this Friday morning belongs to him, Rowan, the elder of the two Radley children. He is wide awake, despite having drunk six times the recommended dose of Night Nurse.

He is always awake at this time. If he is lucky, on a good night, he will drop off to sleep at around four to wake again at six or shortly after. Two hours of tormented, restless sleep, dreaming violent nightmares he can't understand. But tonight it's not a good night, with his rash playing up and that breeze blowing against the window, and he knows he will probably be going to school on no rest whatsoever.

He puts down his book: Byron's *Collected Poems*. He hears someone walking along the landing, not to the toilet but to the spare room.

The door to the airing cupboard opens. There is a slight rummaging around, and a few moments of quiet before she can be heard leaving the room. Again, this isn't entirely unusual. Often he has heard his mother get up in the middle of the night to head to the spare bedroom with some secret purpose he has never enquired about.

Then he hears her go back to bed and the indistinct mumble of his parents' voices through the wall.

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Dreaming

Helen gets back into bed, her whole body tense with secrets. Her husband sighs a strange, yearning kind of sigh and nuzzles into her.

'What on earth are you doing?'

'I'm trying to kiss you,' he says.

'Please, Peter,' she says, a headache pressing behind her eyes. 'It's the middle of the night.'

'As opposed to all those other times, when you would want to be kissed by your husband.'

'I thought you were asleep.'

'I was. I was dreaming. It was quite an exciting one. Nostalgic, really.'

'Peter, we'll wake the children,' she says, although she knows Rowan still has his light on.

'Come on, I just want to kiss you. It was such a good dream.'

'No. You don't. You want more. You want—'

'So, what are you worried about? The sheets?'

'I just want to go to sleep.'

'What were you doing?'

'I needed the toilet.' She is so used to this lie she doesn't think about it.

'That bladder. It's getting weaker.'

'Good night.'

'Do you remember that librarian we took home?'

She can hear the smile in his question. 'Jesus, Peter. That was London. We don't talk about London.'

'But when you think about nights like that, doesn't it make you—'

'No. It was a lifetime ago. I don't think about it at all.'

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A Sudden Tweak of Pain

In the morning, shortly after waking, Helen sits up and sips her water. She unscrews the jar of ibuprofen tablets and places one on her tongue, as delicately as a communion wafer.

She swallows, and right at that moment as the pill washes down her throat, her husband – only a few steps away in the bathroom – feels a sudden tweak of pain.

He has cut himself shaving.

He watches the blood glistening on his damp, oiled skin.

Beautiful. Deep red. He dabs it, studies the smear it has made on his finger and his heart quickens. The finger moves closer and closer to his mouth, but before it gets there he hears something. Rapid footsteps rushing towards the bathroom, then an attempt at opening the door.

'Dad, please could you let me in . . . please,' says his daughter, Clara, as she bangs hard against the thick wood.

He does as she asks, and Clara rushes in and leans over the toilet bowl.

'Clara,' he says, as she throws up. 'Clara, what's wrong?'

She leans back. Her pale face looks up at him, from above her school uniform, her eyes desperate through her glasses.

'Oh God,' she says, and turns back towards the bowl. She is sick again. Peter smells it and catches sight of it too. He flinches, not from the vomit but from what he knows it means.

Within a few seconds, everyone is there. Helen is crouching down next to their daughter, stroking her back and telling her everything is all right. And their son Rowan is in the doorway, with his Factor 60 sunblock still needing to be rubbed in.

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'What's happening to her?' he asks.

'It's fine,' says Clara, not wanting an audience. 'Honestly, I'm okay now. I feel fine.'

And the word stays in the room, hovering around and changing the air with its own sick-scented falseness.

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