

Someone To Come Home To

Caroline entwined her fingers through the shopping bag handles and heaved herself out of the seat. She ricocheted down the aisle as the bus lurched and bounced in accordance with the bus drivers' manual in the section on how to annoy/injure passengers.

She dreaded to think what she must look like. She felt as if she had been stood, fully-clothed, in a cold shower for two hours and had had her hair brushed with a rose bush. Her resemblance to a hedgehog must, by now, be uncanny. Water dripped from her hair and trickled down the back of her collar. When she sniffed, as much out of self-pity as of necessity, the dank smell of wet clothing and the odour of sour bodies accompanied her as she was buffeted towards the exit.

The doors swished open and, as she descended, her shoe fell off and landed butter-side-down into the small stream which ran in the gutter. Close to tears, she disentangled her fingers from her bags and retrieved it before it was washed away to some distant estuary.

She didn't know how much of the water which ran down her face was rain and how much of it was tears. Tears of pity, undoubtedly, but, mostly, tears of frustration at the thought of Gary lying on the settee in their nice, warm, dry – yes, dry! – living room, watching his precious football results, having, no doubt, already sated himself with the racing and the rugby, while she was out 'enjoying' herself shopping.

The more she thought about Gary, the angrier she became. He thought he was perfectly within his rights – no, it *was* his right – to dismiss her to her shopping whilst he vegetated in front of the box. It never crossed his mind – the idea never nestled in that tiny brain cell that he ought to go with her. He considered it a woman's

job and that was it. She wondered if there was steam rising from her hair as she felt her face heat up with rage.

It had been different at first. When they had first married Gary had always gone shopping with her: to the supermarket, to the shopping centre, wherever. It had been like dragging a dead dog around but at least he had been there, if not in spirit, then in body.

She supposed it had been her own fault for allowing him too much slack on his leash. Now he was so free she couldn't draw the leash taught enough to snap him back into place.

Cars sped by like speedboats, casting cascades of water in Caroline's direction and she dodged and stopped and started like a chess piece. She could no longer feel her fingers where the garrotting tightness of the bag handles had cut off the blood supply.

The bus stop was much further from their house than she had realised. It was something she had never thought about. They built these big estates up in the hills and presumed everyone had cars and wouldn't need a convenient bus stop. She did have a car, of course, and would be in it now if her useless husband had seen to its repair.

He entered her awareness again like a toothache and his presence reactivated her anger towards him. Why should she, who worked just as many hours in a week as him, but who came home to cook, wash, iron, bed-make, garden and endless other chores, why should she be here whilst he was lounging, lizard-like, with no more urgent thoughts running through his limp brain other than how his beloved United were going on?

She had told him weeks ago that the car was playing up. It had cut out last

week and she had only managed to restart it after moments of embarrassment and panic at the traffic lights. Perhaps he'd prefer it if she took a course in motor car maintenance, then she could take the responsibility for the repairs away from him too

He'd said he was going to take the car to his 'mate', Frank, who 'knew a thing or two' about cars. Caroline suspected that Frank would need to know more than two things about cars to fix hers.

But, of course, Gary had never taken it. It had been another of those things he'd put off until it was too late – like now; like the lawn mower. That had been broken for weeks and he had been going to get it fixed. Now their lawn was like the Serengeti and still the mower sat uselessly in the garage.

Caroline paused under a welcoming awning and placed her bags on the floor in order to restore the circulation to her fingers. People hurried by, heads bent against the weather, umbrellas clutched like crucifixes.

Of all the places for the car to break down it had to be in Hargreaves Street – bandit country. She had driven past a burnt-out car seconds before hers had finally had enough. She shouldn't even have driven down there but it was a short cut which avoided the town centre. At least they wouldn't be able to steal the car unless they repaired it first, but it would probably be raised on bricks by the time she got back to it. Or worse, a pile of burnt out metal like the other skeleton she'd seen.

She dare not have left her shopping in the car or the locals would have thought it their birthdays.

Picking up her bags, she gathered her determination and began wading towards the hill that rose to their estate. And still it rained relentlessly. She wouldn't have thought the clouds could have held so much water.

Gary wouldn't even have put the kettle on. She didn't know what time it was and couldn't be bothered trying to look at her watch, but she suspected it was football results time and she would be the last thing on Gary's mind – less so than usual.

Her thoughts tumbled with the things she wanted to say to him. She knew what she would really like to say but knew also that she would never be able to voice the expletives that swirled in her head. No insult would be satisfactory enough without using the words she couldn't.

He would be sat there in front of the box, with a beer by his side, a packet of crisps in his hand (which was the nearest he came to making a meal for himself), and the debris of the afternoon's gorging scattered around him. He wouldn't even jump up to help her with the bags when she collapsed through the door. If United had won he'd be happy (she'd make sure his joy didn't last long tonight), but if they had lost then her plight would be nothing compared to his.

And what had he been doing when she'd tried to ring him? She'd sat in the car for a quarter of an hour trying to get through to him and the line had been engaged. She had tried and tried until, finally, her battery had gone dead and she had thrown her phone into her bag. It was another bullet in her gun.

He would have been surfing the net, undoubtedly; looking at things he shouldn't when he thought he was safe; when there were no grown-ups there, like all little boys do.

It was surprising how much steeper the hill was on foot than it was in the car. The bags felt heavier, too, the higher she climbed, the rain was wetter, the air thinner and her anger stronger.

Living rooms were illuminated and Caroline couldn't resist glancing in as she passed. Cosy rooms, warm with people who had stayed inside on such a wild day, or

had finished their shopping – together! – and had arrived home BY CAR!

Her arms seemed to be stretching as gravity dragged on her bags and she paused halfway up the hill to regain her breath.

She tried to compose a suitable attack for when she arrived home. The way she felt at the moment the carving knife in the kitchen drawer seemed the most appropriate form. She continued her climb.

No amount of apologizing would pacify her.

“You should have rung.”

“I tried!”

“You should have got a taxi.”

“There wasn’t one!”

“You should have got the bus.”

“I did!”

She hoped United had lost. She hoped they’d be relegated and go into liquidation. She hoped they’d never win another game.

Their house came into view with the pampas grass growing up to the windows. She walked up the drive. She’d knock – that would make him haul himself up, have those tired, unused limbs pulling in different directions, throw his addled brain into even more confusion.

She was actually going to enjoy this. The anticipation of voicing her rage somehow made her more angry.

The sound of the television floated out to the doorstep. How could he sit there warm and dry while she battled with the elements? She bit her lip to prevent herself from growling.

The door rattled in its frame as she let fly at it with her foot. The hall light

flicked on and she saw his frosted, stupid face through the glass in the door.

Look at him, she roared inwardly. Pathetic specimen. Steam poured down her nostrils as he opened the door.

“What took you so long?” he asked.