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by
Nicci French

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After

I turned around and checked the door of the flat. It was closed. That wasn't enough. What if somebody arrived suddenly? What if they had a key? I pulled my sleeve over my hand so that I wouldn't touch it directly and, awkwardly through the cloth, grasped the bolt and slid it across as quietly as I could. The lights were all on, but the curtains still half open. I sidled round the wall until I reached the window, looking out to make sure nobody was standing in the dark street beneath before I closed them.

Starting at the door, I gazed around the room, dispassionately, like a camera, moving my attention from object to object. There was a framed photograph on the wall. I had never seen it properly before. Now I realized that it was a swarm of blurry orange butterflies. On the small table were a phone (what if it rang?) and a bowl with a small bunch of keys in it. Whose were they? His, probably. I needed to think about that. There was a comfy brown suede chair with the guitar case leaned against it. The guitar lay on the floor beside it, smashed through its centre, strings dangling in the splintered wood. I glanced away to the TV that I'd never seen switched on and to the big striped sofa where we had – No, don't. Don't remember. My scarf was draped across one arm where I had left it a couple of days earlier.

I picked it up and wrapped it around my neck, where the violet bruise throbbed like a nasty memory. There was a

bookshelf. The books, some of which had been scattered onto the floor, were all Liza's, about art, design, a bit of travel. Liza was far from here, a thousand miles away. On some of the shelves were objects and curios, little sculptures and pieces of pottery. A miniature brass Buddha, a green bottle with a silver stopper. Liza used to bring them back from abroad. There was a low cupboard along the far wall and, on top of it, a mini-stereo with a wire rack barely half full of CDs. They were Liza's too – all except one. I walked across and, with care, using my fingers like tweezers, picked up the Hank Williams CD I had brought the previous week. I opened the case. It was empty. Covering my hand with my sleeve again, I pressed the button on the CD player and the tray opened. There it was. I pushed my little finger into the hole, removed it and returned it to the case. I put it on top of the stereo. I'd need to look for a plastic bag.

A pine table that Liza used for working stood against the right-hand wall. The mail that had arrived in the weeks she'd been away was no longer in a pile but spread out messily on the surface, and a few envelopes were on the carpet. On the table, there was also a silver laptop, its lid closed, the power cable coiled neatly on top, a funny little green plastic tortoise for keeping pens and a tin box full of paperclips and rubber bands. The chair that was usually beside it had fallen over. A vase lay next to it, its red tulips and water spilled out on the carpet, darkening it from the colour of pale barley to that of piss.

Next to that the body lay face down on the rug, arms splayed. It was the arms that showed he was dead, even more than the dark stain that had spread from under his

head – really dark, more black than red. I thought of his open eyes staring down into the roughness of the rug, his wide mouth misshapen against the wool. I looked at the hands, stretched out, as if reaching for something.

Before

Those hands. When I first felt them on my face, stroking the skin at the back of my neck, running through my hair; they were softer than I'd expected. Kinder. I felt almost as if he was a blind man learning about my body by touch. He ran his fingers down my naked spine and I felt that I was being played; unfamiliar bass sounds were released from me as he pressed the keys of my vertebrae, strung me out in a pleasure that was close to pain.

After

I couldn't help it. I knelt down beside him for a minute and put one finger into his slightly curled hand, still warm and soft to the touch, and let it rest there for a moment. In spite of everything, he had been mine for a while. He had looked at me as if I was the most beautiful woman in the world,

the most precious to him, and I had comforted him. That's not so far from love.

I stood up again and moved around the room, checking things without being sure what I was checking for. I opened the table drawer, crouched and peered under the sofa, lifted the cushion on the armchair. My leather satchel, the scuffed brown one I had carried as a schoolgirl and used again now that I was back at school as a teacher: it should be here. I knew I had left it on the arm of the chair, its strap unbuckled.

I went into the kitchen, placing my feet carefully on the tiles, heel to toe, so that I wouldn't make any noise. There was the usual mess: unwashed mugs and plates, crumbs on the table, a slop of coffee on the hob, an opened packet of biscuits. I stood quite still. Something was wrong; something did not make sense. I opened each cupboard and looked inside. I pulled out each drawer, wincing as it scraped and squeaked, as the cutlery rattled. Where was my apron, the one I'd brought over when I'd cooked us a meal just a few days ago because for once I was wearing a dress that I would mind staining? Where was my favourite – my only – recipe book, with my name written inside the front cover? 'To Bonnie, with love from Mum.' For a moment I stood quite still, baffled, and with an ominous ache in my chest. The tap was dripping very slightly. Outside, I could hear small gusts of wind in the tree at the back and, in the distance, the cars rumbling along the main road, the shake of a lorry that I could feel in my feet.

I tiptoed into the bedroom. The curtains were closed and the bed was unmade. I could almost make out the shape of his body, our bodies, still there. Clothes were piled for washing in a heap to one side of the door. I

couldn't see my shirt, the one he had ripped off and tossed aside, although I knew where it had been lying. I remembered the way he had looked at me then, a gaze that made me want to cover my nakedness. I couldn't see my old T-shirt and flannel shorts, the ones I wear at night if it's cool. I pulled open each of the chest's drawers. A few of Liza's clothes were there, the ones she hadn't wanted to take with her, and some of his, but none of mine, and no satchel either. I sat on the bed and closed my eyes for a few seconds, and in the darkness I thought I could feel him there beside me. Would I always live with this or would it fade and dwindle?

There was only one toothbrush in the bathroom. It was mine. His was gone. I took it. My deodorant was missing but his was there. My razor was missing but his was there. My small tub of body lotion was missing. I stared at myself in the small mirror above the basin. Dark eyes in a small white face. Dry lips. The bruise flowering on my neck, half hidden by the scarf.

I returned to the living room. He seemed more massive than before, deader somehow. How quickly does a body become cold? How quickly does red blood turn sticky? If I touched him again, would he feel hard, a corpse now, not a man? Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw his hand move, and I had to stare at it to convince myself that it was impossible.

I was standing on something and when I looked down I saw it was the wedding invitation. I stooped and picked it up, folded it in half and then half again, and pushed it with the toothbrush I was still holding into the pocket of my jeans.

Before

'Cheers.' I raised my glass of cold white wine and clinked it against theirs. 'Here's to the holidays.'

'Liza and I aren't on holiday, remember,' Danielle said. 'Only teachers get six whole weeks.'

'Only teachers deserve six whole weeks. Here's to the summer, then.'

I took a sip and leaned back luxuriously. It was evening but the air was still soft and warm. I needed the summer – the late mornings, the hot, light-filled days, the time away from classes of teenagers making tentative scrapes and whistles on their violins and recorders, the staff room where we were no longer allowed to smoke but drank too many cups of coffee instead, the evenings marking homework and trying to sort out my life, paper by paper, bill by troubling bill.

'What are you going to do with all the time you've got?'

'Sleep. See films. Eat chocolate. Get fit. Swim. Catch up with friends. Decorate my flat at last.'

Several months ago I had moved out of a two-bedroom flat I had loved into one of the smaller, darker, dingier one-bedroom flats that Camden Town had to offer, with thin walls, flaking window frames, a fridge that leaked and a radiator that spluttered and only got warm when it felt like it. My project was to do it up. I had romantic ideas of rescuing beautiful pieces of furniture from skips and wielding a brush to work miracles with whitewash, but first I had to scrape away layers of paint and paper, pull up the

patterned carpet, and try to persuade overworked friends to take a look at the electrics and the suspicious brown stain spreading on the ceiling.

'So I'm at home this year,' I said. I turned to Danielle. 'I guess you're going away after the wedding.'

'Honeymoon in Italy,' she said, and gave a small, triumphant smile. I felt a stab of irritation. Danielle seemed to think that her approaching marriage meant that she had achieved a moral ascendancy over Liza and me. We had been at university together, part of the great student democracy of mess and heartbreak and growing up, but now she behaved as though she had pulled ahead of us in a race we hadn't even known we were in, and was looking down on us with a mixture of superiority and pity: Liza, the drunken hoarse-voiced partygoer, and me, the flat-chested school teacher with bleached hair and a string of unfortunate relationships behind me. She was even starting to look different. Her dirty-blonde hair had been expertly layered, styled and flounced; her fingernails were painted a pearly pink (all the better to show off the single diamond); she wore a light summer skirt and looked pretty and unthreatening, as if she were trying to tone down her sexuality in order to become the sweet, blushing bride. I was half expecting her to squeeze my hand and tell me not to worry, that my time would come.

'September the twelfth, isn't it?' Liza poured herself another very large glass of wine and took a deep slurp, smacking her lips with gusto. I gazed at her with affection: one of the buttons on her very tight shirt had come undone, and her mane of auburn hair fell in a muss over

her flushed face. 'We'll have to think what wedding present to get you. Something unusual.'

'There's only one thing I want from both of you,' Danielle said, leaning forward so I could see tiny drops of perspiration above her upper lip. For a moment, I thought she must have a wedding list and that I would have to buy an electric kettle or half a silver teaspoon. 'I want you to play at the party.'

'What?' Liza and I spoke at the same time, an identical note of incredulity and dismay in our voices.

'I've been dying to ask you. Honestly, it would mean so much to me. And to Jed.'

'You mean, play music?' I said stupidly.

'I've never forgotten the evening when you played at that uni fund-raiser. Gorgeous. It made me cry. It was one of the happiest evenings of my life.'

'Not of mine,' I said, which was an understatement. 'Anyway, Danielle, we haven't played together for – well, probably not since that evening.'

'Definitely not since that evening,' said Liza, with a snort. She'd been the singer and even then, nearly a decade ago, her voice had been hoarse from smoking. I couldn't imagine what it would be like now – something like a rook with twigs in its mouth. 'I don't know where half of them have gone.'

'And don't want to know,' I added.

'Ray's in Australia.'

'You can get together again,' said Danielle. 'Just this once. It would be fun. Nostalgic.'

'I don't know about that.'

'For my sake?' she said winsomely. She didn't seem to understand that we had no intention of playing at her wedding. 'You only get married once.'

'It's impossible,' said Liza, happily. She waved her hands in the air exuberantly. 'I've got my sabbatical and you won't see me for dust. I'm away for four whole weeks in Thailand and Vietnam. I get back just a couple of days before your wedding. Even if we could persuade the others, which we couldn't, I wouldn't be around to rehearse. Neither would most of them. It's summer, after all.'

'Oh,' said Danielle. She looked as if she might weep, her cherished plans gone awry. Then she brightened again, propped her small chin on her hand and directed her words at me. 'But you're here, Bonnie. All summer. Doing your flat up.'

I don't know how it was that I said yes, when I really meant no no no *no*. On no account. I don't know how I allowed my lovely six weeks of pottering about between bouts of decorating to be invaded. But I was a fool, and I did.

After

I didn't know what to do next, and although I understood that every second might matter, that time was running out, I simply stood in the living room, not looking at where he lay face down in the puddle of his own blood. I tried to think, but there were spaces in my brain where thoughts should have been. At one point, I put my hand on the bolt ready to leave, to run into the road and breathe in the night air, but I

stopped myself. I wiped the bolt clean with my sleeve, rubbing at the smudge, imagining the spirals of my fingerprints disappearing. I couldn't leave. I had things to do. Tasks. I swallowed hard. I breathed, in and out, as deeply as I could. It was difficult. My breath jammed in my windpipe so that for a moment I thought I would suffocate. I imagined my body falling, coming to rest beside his on the floor, my eyes staring into the tufts of carpet, my hand over his.

I got a plastic bag from the cupboard under the kitchen sink and put in my CD, the toothbrush and the wedding invitation. I started in the bedroom, where most of his things were. I had to do this right. I had only one chance. I found his passport in the drawer of the bedside table, as well as a packet of condoms, and I took both of these and dropped them into the bag. What else? I went into the bathroom and took his razor, his deodorant and his empty sponge bag. His jacket was hanging on the back of a chair in the living room. I felt in the pockets and found his wallet. I thumbed through it. There was a credit card, a debit card, a tatty paper driving licence, a twenty-pound note (that I'd lent him), a small photograph of a woman I didn't recognize, a passport-sized photograph of him. His glowing eyes, his sudden smile, his hands on my body. Even now, with his body dead on the floor, my skin tingled with the memory. I dropped the wallet into the plastic bag. What else? He owned so little. 'You,' I heard him say, as clear as if he was by my side. 'I possessed you, Bonnie.' And I felt clammy and cold all at once, goosebumps on my skin and sweat on my forehead as if I was going to be sick. I pressed my fingers against my temples to stop the pounding.

As I stood there like that, I heard the phone, not the flat

phone, not my mobile, which I had turned off anyway. So that was what I'd forgotten. His mobile. I knew where it would be and the muffled sound of the ringing tone confirmed it. I waited until it stopped, then made myself go back to the body and squat beside it. With half-closed eyes I pushed my hand under it and felt for the rectangle shape. I wriggled my fingers down into the pocket and drew out the mobile. I didn't put it into the bag, though. I turned it off without looking at who had called him and slid it into my pocket.

I looked down at him. At it, huge on the floor. Now what? Because I knew that I couldn't do this alone.

Before

Keeping a class of teenagers under control is a bit like conducting an orchestra, except that it's an orchestra made up of some kind of feral, man-eating beast. It's one of those animals that can smell your fear; it can see it in your eyes, sense it in the shortness of your breath, the acceleration of your heartbeat. And then it goes for you. But it doesn't kill you immediately. It's like a crocodile or a shark that grabs you and plays with you for a while. There were teachers who arrived with confidence and qualifications and thick skin, but just one thing would go wrong and you'd find them crying in the toilets. And when things got really out of control, there was only one thing to be done: send for Miss Hurst.

Miss Hurst was Sonia, who had become my best friend at the school and then perhaps my best friend out of the school as well. We hadn't known each other long, but we had got on from the moment we first met in the staff toilets on the first day of term. She wasn't naturally sociable or extrovert – some of the other teachers felt she held herself aloof – and her wholehearted friendship was like a gift she had conferred on me. She had long dark hair and she was larger than me, taller and more imposing, I guess, but her authority wasn't about her physical presence, so far as I could tell. I hadn't properly seen her in action because kids didn't mess around in my lessons. In fact, it wasn't really possible for them to do so: shouting and singing and dancing and moving were what you were meant to do in my classes. Her control didn't have much to do with discipline and nothing whatever to do with threats of punishment, although her contempt, which could be withering, felt a bit like a blow-torch to your ego. She was just so obviously capable. Her subject was chemistry, and obviously you'd trust her to put two chemicals together without blowing the school up – but you also assumed she'd know how to fix a car or pull out a splinter or tie a bow-tie, and she knew how to manipulate that strangest of organisms, a roomful of hormonal teenagers. Just before the end of term, she had put in her application to be the new deputy head, and although she was young for the post, I felt certain she'd be successful: if Sonia was around, you felt safer.

So, she seemed a natural person to call on. She used to play the violin, rather badly, in the school orchestra, but she could sing. She had a good ear and the right husky

sort of voice. She wasn't conventionally beautiful, but she was better than that. She had presence: when she was in a room you wanted to look at her; and when she was in a group you wanted to please her. She held herself well, she was confident without being irritatingly arrogant, and if she could stand in front of a class, she could sing a few old country songs at a wedding.

I lured her to my flat under false pretences. I fed her on bagel chips and white wine and asked her advice about colour schemes and light fittings. She had strong opinions, of course, much stronger than any of mine. I inquired casually whether she was going away for the summer. She wasn't; she didn't have the money for it. I took a breath.

'No,' she said. 'Absolutely not.'

I filled her glass.

'You're tempted, aren't you?' I said.

'The idea is completely ridiculous.'

'Can't you imagine yourself standing in front of the musicians, like Nina Simone or Patsy Cline?'

'What musicians?'

Yes, I thought. She's going to do it.

'So far just me,' I said. 'I mean, actually confirmed.' I felt obliged to add, 'The first two people I asked turned me down flat.'

'Who else was in the group? Anyone I know?'

'Amos, of course. That's when we met.'

'Amos?' Was I imagining it, or did Sonia flush? I looked away, not wanting to see, not wanting to acknowledge the suspicion that had been growing for several weeks now

– that she was interested in him. Why did this make me feel so panicky? After all, they were both free, no betrayal would be involved, everyone had behaved honourably. I hated to think that I wanted to be separate from Amos yet still have him hanker after me. When she spoke next, her voice was determinedly casual. 'Is he taking part in this?'

I hesitated. 'I haven't asked him. Yet.'

'And it won't be awkward?'

'Why would it be? It was perfectly amicable, after all.'

Sonia smiled at me, the moment of awkwardness gone. 'Breakups are never amicable,' she said. They're catastrophes – or they're amicable for one person and not for the other. When it's amicable it's only because neither of them was committed in the first place.'

I took a sip, more than a sip, of wine and felt it sting my gums. There was a familiar ache in my chest when I thought about Amos – not pain, but the memory of pain, which has lodged itself in your bones and become part of who you are. 'Well,' I said lightly, 'we managed to remain friends, kind of, whatever that means about our relationship in the first place.' All those high hopes and buoyant plans for the future that hadn't exploded in some climactic break-up but had gradually withered and died, leaving behind a long-drawn-out dejection, a disappointment in us, in myself. All those months when we both knew but couldn't admit that the journey we had set out on together was petering out and that one day soon our paths would separate. In some ways I would have preferred Sonia's catastrophe to the gradual rusting and corrosion we had experienced with a sense of helpless regret.

'Who actually ended it?'

'It wasn't like that.'

'Someone must have said the words.'

'Probably it was me. But only because he didn't have the courage.'

'Was he very upset?'

'I don't know. I was – but you know that. You saw some of it.'

'Yes,' said Sonia. 'Sad, drunk evenings.' We grinned at each other ruefully. It seemed a long time ago now; long enough for Sonia to be thinking of taking my place.

I gave a little shiver. 'You got me through. You and Sally.'

'And whisky.' Sonia always deflected sentimentality.

'And whisky, true. Whisky, beer, coffee, music. Speaking of which ...'

'Will Amos want to play in a band with you?'

'I haven't asked. I don't know.'

Sonia looked at me intently, then gave a nod. 'You waited until the third glass of wine before asking me, didn't you?'

'The second, I think.'

'The third, definitely,' Sonia said, taking a sip as if to confirm it. 'On the minus side, you've only heard me in the choir.'

'And that karaoke night last year.'

'Was that me?'

'One of the best versions of "I Will Survive" I've ever heard.'

'On the plus side, I don't know any of the people who'll be in the audience. Does it matter if you make a fool of yourself in front of people who don't know you?'

'It's like a tree falling in the forest.'

After

I took my mobile out of my bag and turned it on, punched in the first three digits of the number. Then I changed my mind and turned it off again, dropping it back into the bag as if it might burn my fingers. I had read articles in newspapers about how experts can tell not just whom you called on your phone, but precisely where the call was made from. People were caught out like that, alibis broken.

I couldn't use the landline, and I couldn't use his mobile, wedged into my pocket. For a brief moment, I thought of giving up and simply dialling 999, weeping to the impersonal voice at the other end. Thoughts hissed in my brain and I tried to separate them out, think each through. I picked up the keys from the bowl, checking to make sure the flat key was among them. Then – through my sleeve again – I unbolted the door and opened it, giving his body a last swift glance before stepping out onto the landing and closing the door behind me. It gave an agonizing click as I pulled it shut. What if someone saw me? I knew that the family next door were away on holiday, because we had been watering their plants for them – or, rather, I had. The young man who lived upstairs was around, although not during the day and usually not until very late in the evening, and today was Friday, the beginning of the weekend. But perhaps he was ill and lying in bed just above me. Or perhaps he was on his way home right now. He could be turning off Kentish Town Road at this very moment and walking up the little dogleg lane, hand already in his pocket

fumbling for the keys. Maybe I'd meet him as I opened the front door. I couldn't move. I stood on the landing, straining for any sound. I took a deep breath and walked purposefully towards the entrance, trying not to break into a run.

Now I was on the unlit street and no one else was there. Even though the pain in my ribs knifed through me, I started to jog past the small garage opposite, but it was closed for the night, only the sign advertising MOTs and bodywork repairs flapping idly in the wind. Round the bend, and still it was dark and empty, and at last I was out on the main road, the blessed relief of lorries and cars and motorbikes thundering past, people I didn't know on the pavement, alone or in laughing huddles, walking slowly because it was summer and the night air was soft and warm. I didn't know which way to turn for a phone box because I'd never needed one before now. Maybe they would all be boarded up and useless, the dead receiver dangling from its cable. I turned left and went under the railway bridge, striding quickly until at last I saw a red telephone box. Inside it smelled of piss. There was graffiti on the glass and a solitary sticker advertising the services of Mischa, who specialized in massages. I needed change, and fumbled uselessly in my purse for a coin, my fingers thick and clumsy. I dialled the number. Let her be in, let her be in. She was.

'Bonnie? Are you all right?'

'I need your help. Right now. It's something big.'

'Tell me.'

Hearing her voice calmed me. 'I can't, not on the phone. You have to come.'

She didn't ask unnecessary questions, just said: 'All right. Are you at home?'

I thought of telling her to come to Liza's flat, but then I remembered she wouldn't know where that was. Also, I realized it would be better to take her there, rather than having her turn up like a normal person. So we arranged to meet outside the phone box and she said she'd come at once. It wasn't far.

I stood outside the box and stared straight ahead, at the people, the plane trees, the orange streetlights, the smudged charcoal horizon. Everything looked unreal, as if I was gazing at a photograph that was slightly out of focus. I turned on my mobile to check the time, then turned it off again. I walked up and down, just twenty paces one way and twenty back. I didn't want to miss her, though I knew it would take her at least ten minutes, even if she had run out of the house as soon as she put down the phone. I hadn't smoked for several years, but I went into the twenty-four-hour shop on the corner and bought a packet of Silk Cut and a box of matches. I lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, felt a nauseous dizziness rush through me, spluttered loudly and long. At least it gave me something to do while I waited.

I wondered whether it was wrong to ask her to help me, to ask anyone. I didn't really wonder. Of course it was wrong. Everything was wrong. But what was my alternative? And who else could I ask? Who else could I trust to tell me what to do? I smoked a second cigarette, more successfully this time, and ground out the stub with my heel for an unnecessarily long time.

At last she was there, in a grey cardigan with her long black hair tied back.

'Thank God,' I said.

Sonia took my arm. 'You're trembling. What's happened?'

‘You have to come with me.’

We didn’t talk as I led her down the lane. She was walking more slowly than I was, and I had to stop to urge her on. I kept expecting to see someone, although Liza’s flat stood at the dead end of the road, just in front of the railway line, and people hardly ever went down there. Sometimes a group of teenagers would be hanging around, up to something out of view of the main road, but now there was nobody. I unlocked the street door but when I reached the door to the flat I stopped.

‘Bonnie?’

‘I didn’t know who else to turn to,’ I said. ‘Please don’t make a sound.’

I unlocked and opened the door and Sonia and I stepped inside. I shut it behind us and drew the bolt.

Sonia managed somehow to stay silent. I didn’t even hear an intake of breath. She stood just inside the room, the body spread out in front of her, and stared at it. Her arms hung loosely by her sides, her chin was jugged forward slightly, her feet were planted slightly apart as if she was scared she might topple, and her face was blank. It was as if someone had taken a damp cloth and wiped away all traces of emotion and thought. I didn’t speak or move either. I waited. All I could hear was the sound of my breathing.

At last she shifted her position slightly and spoke in a whisper. ‘It’s . . .’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s dead.’

‘Yes.’

She looked around the room as if she was expecting

someone else to be standing there. I could see her taking in each separate item: the smashed guitar, the upturned vase and heap of tulips, the chair lying on its side. Her gaze returned to the body. She hadn't looked at me yet, her eyes darting everywhere but towards me. 'I don't understand.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'Sorry?'

'That it was you I called.'

Finally she turned to me. Her eyes flickered. She dropped them from my face to the bruise on my neck.

'Were you and he . . . ?'

'Involved?' I said. 'Kind of.'

She gave a long, deep sigh, as if she had been holding her breath since she stepped over the threshold. Her voice came out in a soft wail. 'Why am I here?'