



THAT'S HER, THERE Helen Cross

It was the early hours of the morning and they were in bed discussing childcare. Christine couldn't sleep. She was due back at work next month, following the birth of her son. Her office was a cool low-ceilinged cubicle in the health and safety department of a double-glazing firm. Tony, her husband, was one of the company's sales reps. Despite her mother's disappointment at her lowly position, Christine liked the job and had worked there for five years, since she was nineteen.

'I'm leaving. It's all up to you.' Tony said. 'Do what you think best.'

'Okay, go,' Christine cried, and leapt from the bed.

'Huh, honey? What you on about?' Tony said, his wife before him rimmed with moonlight like a ghost. 'What's wrong with you now?'

Christine looked down at her serrated nails, the fingertips pink and raw. In recent months Tony had quietly called his wife 'harsh' and Christine's mother had said again that she'd never understand her

daughter's 'vicious streak'.

'Christine,' Tony said slowly, placing a hand on his wife's shaking arm. 'I said: I'm leaving it all up to you. Do what you think is best.'

Christine and Tony had chosen a nursery for their baby rather than a nanny or a child-minder. The place was called Bumble Bees and was situated conveniently on the side of a roundabout on the main commuter route into the city. 'Well, you can stop panicking about cot-death the poor little thing'll be more at risk of lung cancer,' Christine's mother, Shirley, had exclaimed when she'd been told of the plans. 'Do you know that the exhaust fumes in Birmingham are the equivalent of smoking thirty-two cigarettes a day?'

But they'd decided. Bumble Bees was a purpose built, large-windowed new block. It smelt so strongly of disinfectant that Christine imagined the babies marinated in it, wearing it for life; their lonely perfume. There were smoke alarms and fire extinguishers and rules on every door. There was no mystery. No chance for concealment. The staff were bleached clean by strong florescent light. A place like that, regulated, inspected and covered by both CCTV and a live web-link was far safer than a family home with boiling pans, the secrecy of bedrooms, and that constant domestic busyness that hides idleness that hides fury.

Of course Shirley, Christine's mother, had offered to care for the baby full time. Had begged to almost. Though she had six other grandchildren by her three married sons, her only daughter's child was different. 'You'll need more help than anyone,' Shirley had said knowingly.

'It has to fit around our hours, mum. It'd be a too early start for you.'

‘But I’d make changes to my life in the best interests of Joshua. I’m the sort of person who’s quite happy to think of others before myself. I don’t expect *you* to do it. I know *you’ve* got better things to do with *your* time.’

‘It sounds like a cheap idea,’ Tony said with a grin. He never knew what his wife was thinking, which was the main reason why Christine had married him.

‘I know my mother loved me,’ Christine lied, ‘but it was too much. I want Joshua to have more stimulation.’ Christine was thinking how at Bumble Bees each child had their own peg and strapped to the peg was a school exercise book in which was detailed the food eaten, drinks drunk and the number of dirty nappies.

‘Well, whatever,’ Tony said cheerfully. ‘The staff seemed friendly enough,’

Christine agreed, though friendly wouldn’t exactly describe the faces Christine saw in the middle of the night. Or during the day. Thoughts of accidents death and harm were in Christine every minute. It made it hard to know which fears were important warnings, and which just paranoia. It had been like this for most of her life. On her first visit to Bumble Bees Christine had glimpsed two young women whispering in the laundry room. ‘I used to wonder why they spend all that money on these sodding thick, fluffy socks?’ one girl said to her colleague. ‘Then I realised: they’re all totally loaded and they feel guilty.’

‘Quite rightly in my opinion,’ her friend replied. ‘Lazy buggers. I’d never dump my kid in one of these places would you?’

It was so terrible and unbelievable that Christine hadn’t told anyone because she really thought she might have imagined it. This

happened; fears that spoke to her, hung around all day bitching at her.

In the fortnight before Joshua started at Bumble Bees Christine made another unannounced visit. 'Our aim is to give parents peace of mind while they are away from their precious darlings,' the manageress had written under a notice about the new web cam. Precious was spelt, as it always would be at the nursery, as, precious. On every card that Tony and Christine would receive from Joshua, for Christmas, Easter, Diwali, Valentine's Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day and Eid, it would be spelt like this. 'Love from your Precious son Joshua.' 'It seems like a warning,' Christine confessed to her husband.

'Darling, relax, it's just not reasonable to see bad spelling as an omen of cruelty.'

Shirley rang to remind Christine to watch an undercover documentary about brutality in nurseries. 'I was telling Auntie Nesta that you're still set on sending Joshua to that orphanage,' Shirley said, and when Christine protested she continued, 'Oh Christine you're so furtive. Now you're asking me not to talk to my friends. I'm a sociable person, can I help that? I'm not like you, all cagey and peculiar.'

Christine had been on one official visit of inspection, and one unofficial visit, but following the documentary, which had exposed teasing, taunting and bullying at nurseries throughout the land, Christine felt it important to also survey the place more furtively. So at a very early hour for several mornings Christine stood on the edge of the roundabout, and, concealed behind a letterbox, watched. It was February and half dark, the ice still bloomed on the roads and windows, and the rush-hour fumes made her cough and choke, but she saw nothing remarkable, nothing that could justify her rejecting the nursery.

Except that hair. It was the first thing Christine noticed about the girl when she stepped out of the Tuesday fog as if surfacing from a lake. Its colour mostly, then its length. Badly dyed but long and sleek, like wine flowing over chocolate.

The terrible day came. When Joshua was three months old Christine handed him to the girl with the burgundy chocolate hair, who had been revealed as Rachel. She worked at Bumble Bees in the baby room. Joshua was the youngest of the six babies. Legislation demanded one member of staff to three babies. Safi was in charge and Rachel was her assistant. On that first morning, dizzy with nausea, Christine had reached out to shake the girl's small pale hand. It felt soft and limp, like shaking an empty suede glove. The handshake was of course inappropriate, a forced and seemingly frosty gesture: Christine should have been chattier. But it perplexed her in those first days how to behave with the staff. Gradually, by monitoring the other parents, she saw how the most popular favoured a friendly, jokey, familiar approach. Some brought in family photographs to share, others spoke in intimate whispers as if imparting thrilling gossip.

So, it was the same game, Christine decided, as that played in all the relationships of her adult life; you invented yourself as harmless, sociable, friendly and kind. And hoped people would not see the true you beneath the jolly mask.

During Joshua's first week Christine logged onto the web cam for at least a quarter of an hour every hour. She hoped to see something that would necessitate Joshua's speedy departure from the place, but saw nothing worse than the staff in a knot talking amongst themselves, or Rachel looking distractedly out of the window.

When Joshua had been at the nursery for ten days Christine saw Rachel in the street. She was wrapped round the arm of a tall, rugged man with bad teeth. The brute was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words, IT WON'T SUCK ITSELF. Christine had beamed a smile at the girl and tilted her head in a welcoming nod, but Rachel had marched on, not noticing, or maybe ignoring her.

During Joshua's third week Christine was called at work and asked to come and collect Joshua, who was suddenly unwell. She was at least half an hour's drive away. Shirley lived closer. Christine wanted to call her mother and ask her to go immediately. But Christine couldn't ask for any help without being blamed so she'd driven recklessly through the city alone. Not crying, but with a chill sweat on her brow and a wringing sensation in her bowels. As she approached the entrance to the nursery she noticed a car parked irregularly, one wheel humped up against the pavement, the back wheels twisted, as if the car had suddenly swerved and stopped. The car windows were fully open. As Christine came nearer she heard laughter. Breathless, she happened to glance in, a large man, dirty, a builder maybe, a street sweeper, was leaning over, wolf-like. For a moment it appeared that he was eating, feasting on something, for there was a hungry movement of his head. There was smoke from a cigarette, litter, bare legs. The man was leaning over a girl whose seat was reclined right back, totally flat and then... the girl rose up. It was Rachel who pushed her hair out of her flushed face lazily and said, 'Hiya,' to Christine.

'I'm really pleased with how it's going there. There's only Rachel who I'm unsure about,' Christine confessed to Tony that weekend, 'She just looks so – blank.' This wasn't true: Rachel didn't look blank:

she looked absent through ecstasy. Possessed. Full of secrets. When she wound her hair round her finger and stared over the roundabout she was a dirty love-struck princess smirking at the moon. ‘I saw her slumping against the doorframe when she was looking in on the pram room. They are meant to maintaining a constant vigil according to this,’ Christine laughed, throwing down the Bumble Bees brochure. ‘A constant vigil!’

‘And *you* think they really do do you?’ Shirley said when Christine explained about how much fun Joshua was having at the nursery. ‘The probably don’t do any of those so-called creative things they tell *you* about. They just say what *you* want to hear.’

The next day when Christine arrived to collect her son Rachel was sitting alone with Joshua on her knee. Rachel’s long hair was scraped back into a pony tale and she chewed a single strand in the corner of her chapped mouth. There was a black ring of mascara below her eye, her face looked blotched and sore. Hungover. ‘Nice to see ya,’ Rachel said with a hazy smile, then yawned. Joshua was nestled close in to the girl’s chest and he looked up with a blink of puzzlement at his mother.

‘Whatever, speak to someone about her,’ Tony said. ‘Honey, deal with it. Imagine it’s a disciplinary at work. Sort it.’

‘She’s not done anything. Looking bored isn’t a sacking offence and it’s not even that I don’t like her,’ Christine said desperately, ‘it’s just that I’m less sure of her than I am of the others.’ Christine was not sleeping. She had not told Tony that she had seen Rachel the previous day standing round the corner from the nursery near to the dustbins with her man. The beast had Rachel pressed up against the wall, those huge hands on her bony hips, his lips sprouting a dirty pout. It was

nearly the end of the day and Rachel thumped at his chest playfully and he held on to her shoulders and tried to kiss her again and again as she cried in a muffled low tone, 'I've gotta go man, I've gotta go.'

'Your peace of mind is our precoius aim,' Tony intoned in the pinched manner of the harried manageress.

'The thing is I was online today and I saw her pick Joshua up. He was crying. She looked totally exhausted. God knows what she's doing all evening. I saw her carry him out of the room, away from the other babies. She had one hand, just one, round his...'

Christine was aware that now she was telling Tony she was chilled with cold and gabbling, her throat was dry, she had an ache around her eyes and the familiar swell of panic was rolling and fattening in her chest. Christine explained how Rachel had carried Joshua from the room like a loaf of bread, sideways, casually under one arm, his head bobbing forward and his legs flailing behind.

'That's her, there,' Christine said, jabbing a finger at the screen. They were at work, in Christine's cubicle, both peering into the screen. 'They keep — evaporating. Her and Joshua. Out of shot. It's like they go out of the building.'

'Is that allowed?' Tony asked anxiously. 'Do they go out?'

'Of course not!' Christine shouted, and noticed that the rest of the office had paused to listen. 'But they weren't anywhere else in the whole place, I stayed on line the whole time looking for them. She disappears with him.'

The next morning the couple sat in the manageress' office asking to see further CCTV footage of the hour between ten and eleven on the previous day. It was hard to know how things had got so serious so quick. One minute Christine was in her office moaning about it, then

she was shaking at the kitchen table and the next she was calling an out of hours emergency number and demanding a meeting first thing in the morning. One minute Tony was rubbing her back and talking about calming down, telling her things were never as bad as she imagined, and the next he was looking through the Yellow Pages for a 24-hour solicitor.

The air in the nursery office was creamy and curdled; the combination of a sharp disinfectant stench and the deep farmyard aroma of dung and milk. The manageress sucked in her cheeks and nodded, her hands crossed neatly in her lap as Christine explained her concerns. Tony gasped as he listened to his wife. There were tears in his eyes at one point. Christine realised he was scared. Had she infected him too with the belief that things would always go wrong and then get worse? It was terrible to think so, but true.

‘I’m afraid of leaving her with my son,’ Christine whispered. ‘It’s just something about the way she is.’

And Christine knew what it was. It was a spiritedness, a mystery, an energy, a sense of daring. All the things she’d hoped to avoid by choosing Bumble Bees. That dark female recklessness that had lain Rachel down in daylight in the car, thrust her up against the wall, led her to bad men, late nights, hangovers and worse. It wasn’t the nursery itself, it was what women were capable of — that was what Christine feared.

‘Let’s see. We have everything here,’ the manageress said uneasily and closed the curtains in her office. In that private cinema with finger paintings on the wall and little screams and shouts all around, Christine and Tony tightened their fists. The pictures were not as good on the CCTV as they were on the web cam. The people

who were so familiar in colour seemed distant and murky. Filmed from the rear every member of staff was hurrying from the scene of the crime, or bending to conceal a syringe, a gag or a gun. Then came the moment Christine had spoken about: Rachel picked up Joshua, laughed for a moment with a colleague then walked out the door and vanished.

‘Ah now I see,’ the manageress said quietly, ‘the reason you couldn’t follow them on the web cam was because the children in this room were out in the garden, so the link was not live. But it has all been recorded on here.’

The film went black, flickered then continued. Christine, Tony and the manageress watched Joshua and Rachel drift together through the large, grey, empty room. The baby’s screams were silent jerks. In a blizzard of static Rachel gathered a pile of cushions. Then she closed the curtains, bathing the room in a leaden light. She returned to the cushions and totteringly fashioned herself a deep nest. ‘What the hell’s she doing?’ Tony shouted anxiously but neither the manageress nor Christine answered, because on the screen they saw Rachel jamming a chair under the door handle.

Rachel crouched then lay back on the cushions. For some time she appeared no more than a dark blotch, like a tumour seen under x-ray. Then there was shifting, and Joshua was lifted over Rachel’s chest, both the girl’s murderous hands on Joshua’s tiny back. The curtains closed. The room empty. Nothing happened. The chair tilted against the door. Rachel’s hands blurred over the baby’s head and his neck, then touched his lips — as if to press the screams back in.

Christine’s breath was turning to wood, that familiar cork in her throat. Of course she was thinking, again, again, of how when was a

young girl she had done a very terrible thing. She had locked her playmate in the garden shed. It had been no accident. The girl was tender and weak, and prone to crying and had proved an extremely irritating friend. 'She's not the full shilling,' Shirley had told Christine. 'I'm not surprised you get annoyed with her.' Christine and the little girl had been playing together and when it came time to go in for tea Christine had suddenly, without thinking, but with a huge passion and excitement, locked the key in the door, trapping the girl in a dark damp oniony tomb. Christine had then gone in for tea with her mother and her three brothers.

Christine was seven and it was the first time she had ever done anything like it. She had no history of evil or cruelty. She had planned to nip back out after a few minutes and release the girl but as the family sat in silence eating their tea the thought of the girl in the shed, in the dusk, in the soily ratty dark, made the boring tea time most interesting. Christine had a secret, and she tasted, for the first time, the thrilling power of concealment. She had never felt such supremacy. Everything was unusual to the new Christine, even her stern mother scowling through the cabbagey steam, her blouse patched with wet from the bowl. Christine thought of what she had in the shed. Her own little prisoner. She drummed her toes under the table in excited terror and looked at her brothers with a new shrewd smile. She ate her tea daintily like a queen

Just ten minutes later, when tea was not even finished, there was a shattering sound and Shirley, predicting a burglar, raced from the kitchen down to the shed, roaring. Her brothers followed first and then far behind, came Christine.

Christine's prisoner, proving more adventurous than her timid

character had suggested, was trying to escape from the shed. She had broken a window with a can of paint. It took only a few seconds for the girl to climb up on the lawnmower and try to haul herself up onto the window ledge. And in so doing slip. And slice her wrist on the shards of glass. Screaming, alone in the dark she had pressed the cut to her dress, rubbed it against her mouth, over her face in a wild frenzy of pain and shock. So Shirley was quite right to say to her husband later, that the 'scene was like something from a massacre.'

Lying like that, dark and still, as if dead on the floor, Rachel and Joshua made an oddly humped double-backed creature. Rachel then began to rock and at first Christine thought Rachel was crying, and she felt it so strongly that she leant forward and whispered, 'She's crying!'

'Is she crying?' Tony echoed. He was crying because for the first time ever he saw that his wife was crying.

'Is she?' the manageress said, leaning forward too, looking urgently at the screen, her eyes wide, her head going side to side, as one looking down into a stream for a fish. 'No,' the manageress said with relief, 'I don't think so. She's singing.'

In other rooms of the nursery they could hear children crying or playing, doors swished open and there were bursts of conversations, crying and laughter. The singing went on, silently. The timer clicked round in one corner of the screen, the date remained momentous in the other. The swaying and singing, it went on and on. At one point Rachel leant up from the nest of cushions and took the bobble from her hair. The faraway moment, moody in black and white, looked wild and cinematic as her long tresses tumbled down over her shoulders and her head swayed with the tune. She spread that ebony hair out as

if underwater and lay back and opened another button of her cardigan.

‘I’ve seen better movies,’ Tony said nervously, through the slow loop of that time. He touched his wife’s neck. The couple saw their baby’s head move for a moment then settle against the bare pad of Rachel’s young white chest. The legs stopped rocking.

‘And it goes on like that for some time,’ the manageress said suddenly, standing up from her chair. ‘I’m sorry to have to say that she fell asleep. Apparently she’d been out all night.’

‘And is this allowed?’ Tony laughed, relieved. He went on, in imitation of incredulity and began to ask all kinds of interrogating questions that Christine did not hear. She kept watching the screen, the hump of girl and baby, sleeping, at rest, safe. The legs flopped to one side, the hair half over the face, the baby backed like a tortoise on the girls’ chest, sleeping.

The couple walked back quickly to their car across the park, Joshua quiet in his mother’s arms. Christine wanted to run. ‘At times it was like watching a horror film,’ Tony said quietly. ‘Though I’d say overall it all had a pretty happy ending’

Christine nodded. She could feel the spring hitting her face, a grassy windblown scent. It was as if some great damp grey overcoat has slipped from her body. As if she is now naked, just born, delivered, carried over the park by the wind.

She’d never told anyone, certainly not her husband, about her prisoner in the shed. Or how the family had moved away afterwards. Or how for years, no matter how far she was from the village, she’d hear whispers in the street, ‘That’s her, there, the one who almost killed a little girl.’ But now she feels like she might tell Tony. He will

say, 'But honey it wasn't your fault it was just an extraordinary accident.'

She looks at him and reaches for his hand. He misunderstands. 'Don't worry about seeing her again either,' Tony says, kindly, 'she's getting sacked. And the one who colluded with her.'

The sky was so blue you could feel it staining your skin and Christine felt she alone had invented sky. She has to remember to look down at the grass not up at the clouds for fear that she will bounce right off the ground. She has to bite her own cheek to stop herself shouting and singing.

'Oh honey,' Tony says putting his arm around her waist. 'Don't look so glum You've got nothing to feel bad about you've got to stop feeling guilty about everything. You did the right thing. You always do. Let me treat you. I want to cheer you up. What do you want to do?'

Go to see her mother. Tell her how a wild young girl could have done a terrible thing to Joshua. Could have, but didn't.

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