



HUM DIDDY EYE DI Sara Crowley

Cold blobs of porridge float in the washing up bowl where she dumped the breakfast things to soak. She curls her lips in disgust as she tips the water away and fishes the food out of the plughole.

Bob watches a video of Toy Story; he watches the same one daily, hates to deviate from routine. He has flung his uniform to the floor and sits in his pants, waiting for food to be served. She leans against the oven, tired, her mind a blank space of sanctuary for a moment before she forces on, butter from the fridge, beans bubbling in the pan, Bob's orange cup to be filled with water.

'Dinner,' she calls.

He doesn't respond, he never does until she gets angry. Kerry splits the baked potato and fluffs its innards. Steam puffs into her face

and hot irritation blazes through her. She calls again. She wonders about the faint sound she can hear. She presses her ear against the fridge door. She hears the electrical thrum of it: that's not it. She goes to the radio in case she's left it on low. Then the light switch, which emits a slight buzz. Nope, not that. In the centre of the room she tilts her head one way then the next, seeking the hum.

Now, she wonders if it was traffic, or water pipes.

The wine is cold, it feels like a deep sigh as she chugs it down. Kerry puts her feet up on the grey foot stool and flicks the channels. She should do the ironing or clean the toilet. Stuff to do; nagging at her. Instead she sits exhausted. Bobby is in bed, his evening rituals all done; last sip of water, last bedtime story, tucked in just the way he likes, last goodnight kiss. But now he appears in the doorway.

'Mummy?' he says. 'Mummy.'

'What is it?'

'Mummy.' He stands shuffling from foot to foot and then turns his palms outwards, a rather adult gesture of not knowing.

'Bobby, what do you want?' she enunciates each word, letting him hear her annoyance, before propelling him back to bed where she adds children's TV brightness to her tone 'Come on Bobby bear, snuggle up darling, it's a busy school day tomorrow, you need your sleep. Nu-night darling, sweet dreams.'

She returns to the lounge. She can hear the noise again.

Kerry talks into the mouthpiece of the telephone, into the air. She tells Maura how horrid her day has been, her week, her bloody year. She rants about her lack of money and energy. She tells her friend how

Bob is sending her crazy with what the paediatrician calls his 'behavioural difficulties'. Tears come, slithering down her face, a slug trail of salty self-pity. She hates her stupid retail job, her feet ache from standing all day in the almost empty linens department, folding and re-folding towels and sheets. She hates her supervisor, stupid, smug Andrew.

Maura responds appropriately with sympathy and soothing sounds. They have known each other for many years. Maura knows how to make Kerry laugh, and can transport her back to their adolescence with bitchy gossip and silliness. When Kerry hangs up she feels brighter. She pours herself another glass of wine and sits crossed legged on the floor. In front of her she spreads numerous photographs of Bob, which she is attempting to arrange chronologically before placing them in a rose covered album. He was such a beautiful baby, what cheeks! So round and full, she remembers the soft perfect skin, the hundred kisses. When the electric fuzz begins she jumps, scattering a pile of pictures.

Bob sits at the table spooning a mulch of Shreddies into his mouth, milk dribbles down his chin onto his navy v-neck.

'Bob, for heavens sake,' she shouts in exasperation, 'you're six years old, not a bloody baby.'

'Umm,' he replies, 'you said a swear word.'

'Well you make me want to swear Bob, you really do.' She turns back to the counter, spreading the Marmite too thickly across his sandwiches, not caring that the salty tang will render them inedible.

Bob scrapes the chair back and climbs down. Then he rushes to the cupboards and flings some open, slams shut others. The cheap

wooden doors bang and slip on their hinges. He pulls out crockery and cereal packets, bread, teabags. He rips and tips as he goes, a flurry of movement and crumbs. The aural pulsing starts over.

‘Bobby, stop, stop, what’s that sound?’ she speaks quickly hoping to distract him, but he’s stuck in his fury, unreachable until he wears himself out. She has to clean his teeth and get him to school. She has to get herself ready for work. She is late again and feels the pressure of it build in her shoulders. She inhales her upset and begins to cajole him.

He has always been awkward. From birth he wailed unhappily and nothing would pacify him. She tried soothers, milk, nappy changes and cuddles. Together they endured controlled crying experiments, then rocking him in his car seat throughout long unhappy nights. The health visitor said some children were like that and advised Kerry to wind him more carefully.

His demands have changed as he has grown, but still he’s never happy. Kerry feels as if she has failed as a mother, and Bob appears to concur.

Kerry finds herself straining to hear the noise.

Sometimes she thinks that she can but then realises it’s in her own head. It must just be one of those inexplicable things she decides, and puts it down to stress and overtiredness. She struggles through weary days at work, longing for them to be over. She sleeps uneasily, her body held stiffly as her mind slips from nightmare to nightmare. All her fears crowding in, jostling for primary position in her subconscious. She raises her hand high and then brings it smashing

down across Bob's face, then she mumbles and twists in her duvet.

It is a deep drone so low that it should be inaudible, and yet she can hear it clearly. Bob hears it too and together they hunt around the house for its source.

'It's ok mum,' he says proudly, 'it's just my video rewinding.'

'Clever boy,' she says, knowing it's not. What can it be? It's definitely an external sound. She cleans her teeth, the only sound the whizz of her battery operated toothbrush.

She suddenly jolts from her dreamy slide into sleep as the sound penetrates her brain with its loud reverberation. Night terrors fill her. 'Shit, shit,' she gasps. She runs her hands over her face, rubbing her eyes. She feels jangly. She picks up the phone and holding it tightly in case she needs to ring the police, she walks through the house to check on Bob. He is curled up, clutching his Flopsy rabbit. She touches his chest to feel the reassuring beat of his heart and then crouches beside him. She tries to ignore her fear. There is a rational explanation, she decides. Kerry fixes her gaze on the swirly patterned carpet, lulling her mind as she blanks out everything except the circles of deep red. She puts the phone down besides her, keeping it touching her knee. Her eyes prickle, her body twitches and she tumbles into a doze.

A crashing sound invades her tenuous rest.

She tiptoes from Bobby's bedroom and peeps around the door. Her heart is thump thumping violently. In the glow from the hall light she scans the familiar furniture lumps, nothing seems amiss. A whimper escapes from her tightly clamped lips as an unearthly whine

sweeps past her ears. Bob emerges blearily from his room and she switches to calm, mother mode.

‘Bobby, sweetheart, what are you doing out of bed?’ She is approaching him with her arms outstretched for a cuddle carry back to his room, when a decorative glass bowl next to her flies off the window ledge and shatters. Shards of glass glint on the floor as she picks her way through them and snatches Bobby up.

She stands outside the house in her slippers and nightdress, shivering and cuddling Bob, all the while whispering repeatedly a mantra: ‘It’s ok Bobby, everything’s ok.’ She wonders if her screams have roused any of the neighbours, and feels vaguely foolish. What will she say if they ask what’s wrong? She heard a hum? A bowl fell off the side? Kerry knows she is being ridiculous. She has over reacted. She probably knocked the bowl as she rushed to Bob. She’s a silly woman imagining all sorts of nonsense. This is what being alone does.

With a sigh she goes back inside the quiet house.

Maura offers to have them both to stay, but Kerry can’t afford to take time off work. She lets Bob go to Maura’s alone, and hates the relief that spreads through her as she waves him goodbye. The noise ceases. Initially she feels jumpy at night, ready to jolt awake at the slightest sound, but she soon grows to trust in the silence. She spends her days clockwatching in the department store, and at night she slumps in her bed with magazines, wine and breadsticks.

When she speaks to Bobby she feels a gash of loneliness, she misses his occasional surprise kisses, those thin dry lips against her face.

When he first returns there is a calmness between them. It doesn't last. She hugs him in a tight squeeze and tells him how much she missed him, he wriggles away. The rejection catches her sharply, simultaneously they both hear the rumbling static. It begins as a distant wind but gathers energy and volume like a train thundering its approach to a station.

'It's you,' she gasps. 'It's you.' She steps backwards, away from him. Bobby curls himself into a corner of the room emitting squeaky yelps of terror as Kerry sweeps kitchen paraphernalia from shelves and cupboards, their fall adding to the din. Kerry is ashamed of her actions even as she makes them, but all is clear. From his early tantrums to now he has been indefinably different from other children.

He has no friends, he's too loud, too rough, too weird. He's like some sort of horror movie kid.

Then her heart lurches. He looks so vulnerable. She walks towards him, through the tangle of packets and domestic debris. Snot tracks lead from his nose to his mouth; he unconsciously flicks his tongue around to clean it away. When he looks in her eyes the melting begins, she fills with maternal love that overrides everything else.

Kerry reaches for him, suddenly aware that the noise has stopped.

'Shit,' says Kerry. She runs her fingers through her own hair, pulling the long strands taut. I love him, she thinks, I adore him. It remains quiet. Little bastard she thinks, I remember when he bit me last week, out of nowhere, those sharp teeth sinking into my flesh, me trying not to react as they went deeper. The hum starts over.

'I love you,' says Kerry, and means it. There is silence again.

'Shit,' says Kerry. 'It's not you at all. It's me.' She chokes out a sob and wraps her arms around his slim body, pressing her lips against his neck.

'Can I watch Toy Story?' Bob asks.

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