

Wolverine River, Alaska, 1920

Mabel had known there would be silence. That was the point, after all. No infants cooing or wailing. No neighbor children playfully hollering down the lane. No pad of small feet on wooden stairs worn smooth by generations, or clackety-clack of toys along the kitchen floor. All those sounds of her failure and regret would be left behind, and in their place there would be silence.

5 She had imagined that in the Alaska wilderness silence would be peaceful, like snow falling at night, air filled with promise but no sound, but that was not what she found. Instead, when she swept the plank floor, the broom bristles scritchd like some sharp-toothed shrew nibbling at her heart. When she washed the dishes, plates and bowls clattered as if they were breaking to pieces. The only sound not of her making was a sudden 'caw, cawww' from outside. Mabel wrung dishwater from a rag and looked out the kitchen
10 window in time to see a raven flapping its way from one leafless birch tree to another. No children chasing each other through autumn leaves, calling each other's names. Not even a solitary child on a swing.



There had been the one. A tiny thing, born still and silent. Ten years past, but even now she found herself returning to the birth to touch Jack's arm, stop him, reach out. She should have cupped the baby's head in the palm of her hand and snipped a few of its tiny hairs to keep in a locket at her throat.
15 She should have looked into its small face and known if it was a boy or a girl, and then stood beside Jack as he buried it in the Pennsylvania winter ground. She should have marked its grave. She should have allowed herself that grief.

It was a child, after all, although it looked more like a fairy changeling. Pinched face, tiny jaw, ears that came to narrow points; that much she had seen and wept over because she knew she could have loved it still.



20 Mabel was too long at the window. The raven had since flown away above the treetops. The sun had slipped behind a mountain, and the light had fallen flat. The branches were bare, the grass yellowed gray. Not a single snowflake. It was as if everything fine and glittering had been ground from the world and swept away as dust.

November was here, and it frightened her because she knew what it brought — cold upon the valley like a coming death, glacial wind through the cracks between the cabin logs. But most of all, darkness. Darkness so complete even the pale-lit hours would be choked.

30 She entered last winter blind, not knowing what to expect in this new, hard land. Now she knew. By December, the sun would rise just before noon and skirt the mountaintops for a few hours of twilight before sinking again. Mabel would move in and out of sleep as she sat in a chair beside the woodstove. She would not pick up any of her favorite books; the pages would be lifeless. She would not draw; what would there be to capture in her sketchbook? Dull skies, shadowy corners. It would become harder and harder to leave the warm bed each morning. She would stumble about in a walking sleep, scrape together meals and drape wet laundry around the cabin. Jack would struggle to keep the animals alive. The days would run together, winter's stranglehold tightening.

35 All her life she had believed in something more, in the mystery that shape-shifted at the edge of her senses. It was the flutter of moth wings on glass and the promise of river nymphs in the dappled creek beds. It was the smell of oak trees on the summer evening she fell in love, and the way dawn threw itself across the cow pond and turned the water to light.

Mabel could not remember the last time she caught such a flicker.

This passage is from the opening of the novel *Alice and the Fly* by James Rice. Here, we are introduced to Greg, a shy teenager who suffers from arachnophobia (fear of spiders) which he refers to as **Them**. In this extract he is on his way home on the bus.

Alice and the Fly by James Rice

The bus was late tonight. It was raining, that icy winter rain, the kind that stings. Even under the shelter on Green Avenue I got soaked because the wind kept lifting the rain onto me. By the time the bus arrived I was dripping, so numb I couldn't feel myself
5 climbing on board.

It was the older driver again, the one with the moustache. He gave me that smile of his. A hint of a frown. An I-know-all-about-you nod. I dropped the fare into the bowl and he told me I'd be better off buying a weekly pass, cheaper that way. I just tore off my
10 ticket, kept my head down.

The bus was full of the usual uniforms. Yellow visibility jackets, Waitrose name badges. A cleaner slept with her Marigolds on. No one who works in Skipdale actually lives here, they all get the bus back to the Pitt. I hurried up the aisle to my usual seat, a couple
15 of rows from the back. For a few minutes we waited, listening to the click-clack of the indicator. I watched the wet blur of rain on the window – the reflection of the lights, flashing in the puddles on the pavement. Then the engine trembled back to life and the bus pulled off through Skipdale.

I got a little shivery today, between those first couple of stops. Thinking now about all those passengers on the bus, it makes me wonder how I do it every night. It's not people so much that bother me. It's **Them**. I heard once that a person is never more than three metres away from one of **Them** at any time, and since
25 then I can't help feeling that the more people there are around, the more there's a chance that one of **Them** will be around too. I know that's stupid.

We soon reached the Prancing Horse. Even through the rain I could make out the small crowd huddled under the shelter. The
30 doors hissed open and Man With Ear Hair stumbled through, shaking his umbrella, handing over his change. He took the disabled seat at the front and made full use of its legroom. Woman Who Sneezes was next, squeezing beside a Waitrose employee, her bulk spilling over into the aisle. A couple of old ladies showed
35 their passes, riding back from their day out in the crime-free capital of England. 'It's such a nice town,' they told the driver. 'It's such a nice pub, it was such nice fish.' Their sagging faces were so expressionless I could have reached out and given them a wobble.

And then there was you, all red curls and smiles, stepping up to
40 buy your ticket, and the warmth rose through me like helium to my brain.

The land seemed almost as dark as the water, for there was no moon. All that separated sea from shore was a long, straight stretch of beach – so white that it shone. From a house behind the grass-splotted dunes, lights cast yellow glimmers on the sand. The front door to the house opened, and a man and a woman stepped out onto the wooden porch. They stood for a moment staring at the sea, embraced quickly, and scampered down the few steps onto the sand. The man was drunk, and he stumbled on the bottom step. The woman laughed and took his hand, and together they ran to the beach.

"First a swim," said the woman, "to clear your head."

10 "You go ahead. I'll wait for you here."

The woman rose and walked to where the gentle surf washed over her ankles. The water was colder than the night air, for it was only mid-June. The woman called back, "You're sure you don't want to come?" But there was no answer from the sleeping man. She backed up a few steps, then ran at the water. At first her strides were long and graceful, but then a small wave crashed into her knees. She faltered, regained her footing, and flung herself over the next waist-high wave. The water was only up to her hips, so she stood, pushed the hair out of her eyes, and continued walking until the water covered her shoulders. There she began to swim – with the jerky, head-above-water stroke of the untutored.

A hundred yards offshore, the fish sensed a change in the sea's rhythm. It did not see the woman, nor yet did it smell her. Running within the length of its body were a series of thin canals, filled with mucus and dotted with nerve endings, and these nerves detected vibrations and signalled the brain. The fish turned toward shore. The woman continued to swim away from the beach, stopping now and then to check her position by the lights shining from the house. The tide was slack, so she had not moved up or down the beach. But she was tiring, so she rested for a moment, treading water, and then started for shore.

30 The vibrations were stronger now, and the fish recognized prey. The sweeps of its tail quickened, thrusting the giant body forward with a speed that agitated the tiny phosphorescent animals in the water and caused them to glow, casting a mantle of sparks over the fish.

35 The fish closed on the woman and hurtled past, a dozen feet to the side and six feet below the surface. The woman felt only a wave of pressure that seemed to lift her up in the water and ease her down again. She stopped swimming and held her breath. Feeling nothing further, she resumed her lurching stroke.

40 The fish smelled her now, and the vibrations – erratic and sharp – signalled distress. The fish began to circle close to the surface. Its dorsal fin broke water, and its tail, thrashing back and forth, cut the glassy surface with a hiss. A series of tremors shook its body.

For the first time, the woman felt fear, though she did not know why. Adrenaline shot through her trunk and her limbs, generating a tingling heat and urging her to swim faster. She guessed that she was fifty yards from shore. She could see the line of white foam where the waves broke on the beach. She saw the lights in the house, and for a comforting moment she thought she saw someone pass by one of the windows. The fish was about forty feet from the woman, off to the side, when it turned suddenly to the left, dropped entirely below the surface, and, with two quick thrusts of its tail, was upon her.

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This is an extract from the novel *Elizabeth is Missing* by Emma Healey. The narrator Maud is an old lady suffering from **dementia**. In this extract she is being visited by Carla, her carer.

Elizabeth is Missing by Emma Healey

'Have I got enough eggs?'

'Plenty, so you don't have to go out today.'

5 She picks up the carers' folder, nodding at me, keeping eye contact until I nod back. I feel like I'm at school. There was something in my head a moment ago, a story, but I've lost the thread of it now. Once upon a time, is that how it started? Once upon a time in a deep, dark forest, there lived an old, old woman named Maud. I can't think what the next bit should be. Something about waiting for her daughter to come and visit, perhaps. It's a
10 shame I don't live in a nice little cottage in a dark forest, I could just fancy that. And my granddaughter might bring me food in a basket.

15 A bang, somewhere in the house, makes my eyes skitter across the sitting room, there's an animal, an animal for wearing outside, lying over the arm of the settee. It's Carla's. She never hangs it up, worried she'll forget it, I expect. I can't help staring at it, sure it will move, scurry away to a corner, or eat me up and take my place. And Katy will have to remark on its big eyes, its big teeth.

20 'All these tins of peaches!' Carla shouts from the kitchen. Carla the carer. 'Carers' is what they call them. 'You must stop buying food,' she calls again. I can hear the scrape of tins against my Formica worktop. 'You have enough for an army.'

25 Enough food. You can never have enough. Most of it seems to go missing anyway, and can't be found even after I've bought it. I don't know who's eating it all. My daughter's the same. 'No more cans, Mum,' she says, going through my cupboards at every opportunity. I think she must be feeding someone. Half the stuff disappears home with her, and then she wonders why I need to go shopping again. Anyway, it's not like I have many treats left in life.

Glossary

dementia – a brain disease, usually suffered by old people, which affects short term memory and may affect language

This extract is from the opening of the novel *Tanglewreck* by Jeanette Winterson. It is set in modern-day London.

***Tanglewreck* by Jeanette Winterson**

At six forty-five one summer morning, a red London bus was crossing Waterloo Bridge.

5 A group of school children, sitting at the back, were copying each other's homework and fighting, when one of them looked out of the window, across the river, to **Cleopatra's Needle**, and saw something very strange.

10 The boy elbowed his friend. The dark finger of ancient Egypt was pointing towards the sky as it always did, but today the tip of the **obelisk** was glowing bright red, as it had when it was new and painted and glorious, four thousand years ago, in the Temple of the Sun.

'Look,' said the boy, 'look!'

Riding the river as though it were a road was a **phalanx** of chariots and horsemen.

15 The white horses were pulled up on their haunches; the nodding ostrich plumes on their head-collars rose and fell; the fan bearers came forward, the troops stood at ease, and above the kneeling priests was the **Pharoah** himself, inspecting his new monument from a burnished car.

20 Other people turned to stare at the **mirage**, and the bus driver slowed down, though he did not quite stop; he seemed to be hovering over Time.

25 In the slowed-down silence no one spoke and nothing moved – except for the river, which to all observation was running backwards.

Then, from downstream, there was a sudden terrible crack, like the sky breaking. A cone of wind hit the bus, knocking it sideways over the bridge and shattering glass across the seats where the children were sitting.

30 The bus should have crashed down into the river, but instead the wind whirled through the punched-in windows and lifted the bus high above the bridge and out towards the obelisk.

35 A great wave of water swelled up against the stone piers of the bridge, battering the concrete underside with such force that part of the supporting wall was torn away.

40 As the tidal wave slammed back down on to the water, the river resumed its normal flow. At the same second the bus spun crazily into the line of chariots. On impact, bus, chariots and horsemen vanished, leaving nothing behind but traces of red-gold sun on the surface of the water.

Big Ben struck seven.

Cleopatra's

Needle: the Ancient Egyptian pillar in Westminster, London

obelisk: a tapering stone pillar

phalanx: a group of people or things of a similar type forming a compact body

Pharoah: an Ancient Egyptian king

mirage: bent light rays that produce an illusion of an image