

NOT EVEN MYSELF

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PART ONE

“You can’t trust water: Even a straight stick turns crooked in it.” W.C. Fields



I'm guessing that holding your breath for more than forty seconds isn't a good idea. I'm on forty-four seconds and a bright shade of tomato has ballooned before my eyes – which is strange as our stairwell is pitch dark. The metal tool I'm clutching digs into my chest. I've no cushioning there, only lines of ribs. I can't see the creaky fourth step but I slither my foot over it, my free hand on the stone wall for balance.

My lungs burn – breathe, breathe! I must have held on for fifty-five seconds now. Is holding my breath really making me quieter? If anyone wakes up, it'll be Dad. Hurricanes don't wake Adam – though perhaps they do now; he doesn't live at home anymore so I can't be sure. Luke's too scared of the dark to leave his bed at night and Mum usually sleeps heavily until dawn. But Dad's the late-to-bed, late-to-rise sort. Lately, I don't sleep. But I'm not tired.

Did I hear something? But the only sound is the grandfather clock in the dining room:
Silence*Tick!* Silencesilence*Tick!*

I tiptoe down the last three steps and whoosh, I breathe. If it's possible, the dark of the hallway grows darker. I breathe. I breathe. And finally my head stops threatening to roll off my shoulders. Strange shapes emerge from the doorway to the kitchen: charcoal monsters waiting to pounce. A fumble for the light switch but no monsters, just Kitty curled up on the wonky table. She squints open an eye. I put a finger to my lips, like she'd understand the gesture to be quiet. Kitty can meow, when she's really stuck somewhere. But she only shuts her eye again, a faint aura of disapproval ruffling her grey fur.

The kitchen's slate floor is icy. I wish I'd thought to put on socks. I blink a few times because the kitchen light is one of those energy-saving ones and has only just brightened up. Kitchen roll: I tear off several white sheets, tricky while keeping a tight hold on the heavy tool. The noise makes me pause again. *Please don't wake up, please don't wake up.* But there's only

Kitty's yellow-eyed glower and the grandfather clock ticking out of time with my heartbeat.

Thudsilence*Tick!* Thudsilencethudsilence*Tick!*

The shiny tap bends like a swan's neck. My reflection in the chrome is a flesh-coloured strip. Kitty's now at my ankles. Not weaving around me or affectionately rubbing her face on my legs. She's not that sort of cat. She just sits, blinking with a question. I shake my head at her. Kitty won't want any part of what I'm planning.

'In case the water sprays,' I whisper to her. 'You should move back.'

Kitty cleans a white paw, not listening to me. When does she ever? I cover the tap's handle in kitchen roll. As an extra precaution, I'm wearing my least favourite pyjamas, the year-too-small ones with the rose-bud pattern – more suited to a six-year-old than a sixteen-year-old.

'Kitty, move honey.' I nudge her with my foot but she only stares at it before continuing to wash. 'Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

I screw up my eyes, lean back, face turned. Tap *on*. To justify Kitty's lack of concern, the clear water trickles down the plug hole without splashing, drowning the sheets of white kitchen roll and turning them grey. It smells metallic, like my palm when I've held change too long.

'Something's wrong with the water.'

I open the door under the sink, just as the cat-flap clatters open and shut. Shush-shush, I think to the silence.

The cupboard's full of Mum's cleaning things. I half-crawl inside, knocking over bottles of window cleaner and anti-bacterial spray and scouring pads. The water pipes are right at the back but it's too dark to see if they're tarnished. I half-expect them to ooze foul-smelling rust. We had garden chairs that spattered rusty-brown liquid if you moved them. Luke cried once when some of it got on his white shirt.

I can't breathe in here. I wriggle back out and take big gulps of air. Come on, Millie. I dive back into the cupboard, this time angling my body so that a little of the kitchen light limps through to the back.

There they are, two copper pipes like thin legs emerging from the wall and disappearing up the back of the sink. I trace the pipes with my fingers. They're cold but there's no sign of anything suspicious. I scrabble with the cutting tool and rotate it around the copper pipes, the way I watched an expert guy do on YouTube. Steady, steady.

Snip: water sprays everywhere as the pipe is sliced apart. *That* didn't happen on YouTube. I stifle a scream, jumping up and bashing my head on the underside of the sink.

I whip off my wet pyjama top, stumbling through the kitchen doorway. My loose sleeve catches on the handle and pulls the door shut with a slam. My heartbeat drowns out the tick of the grandfather clock and the creak of the fourth step. I fling the pyjamas on my bedroom floor and leap under my duvet. The grey light leeches the colour from the pile of pyjamas. It's the first time I've noticed that the rose-buds look like dirty fingerprints. My eyes squeeze shut.

Rustling from my parents' room. I try to steady my breath and my heart but they leap and gallop and refuse to calm. Suddenly Dad is at my door. He clears his throat but I don't move. I try to breathe evenly but the effort makes me breathless. I take a gulp of air, like I'm dreaming of something particularly nasty. I used to have terrible nightmares - when I used to sleep. Quite often, I'd dream I was weeing on a toilet slap-bang in the middle of the science lab at school. Or I'd dream about giant spiders chasing us out of the house; I think Luke got caught by one and we had to leave him behind. That was bad. Luke grew very pale when I told him about that dream. He probably cried, Luke cries a lot.

‘What the hell’s happened downstairs?’ Dad loudly whispers. It might have been quieter if he’d actually spoken. ‘There’s water everywhere.’

‘I’m fixing things.’

‘What?’ Dad takes a step into my room.

I half sit but don’t turn on my light. Dad is a silhouette, almost creepy.

‘I tried to tell you, and Mum.’ My breath is raggedy like I just escaped those giant spiders, like I just watched Luke get snatched by one. ‘The water tastes weird. We need new pipes.’

Pause. ‘I didn’t know water would go everywhere.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake. We’ll talk about this in the morning.’

Dad turns on his slippers heel and then thumps and clatters downstairs. I’m surprised the whole house isn’t up. I pull the duvet over my head to muffle the sound but that only makes my heartbeat louder. It’s too quick and hoppity. I see my heart working as though I hold it in my hand: the squeeze and push, the pulse, the pause. My heart will stop any second. Any second now.

The beat gets louder, then I realise it’s Dad’s footsteps I can hear, pacing across the landing past my door. Time ticks on, though the odd ticks from the grandfather clock don’t reach my bedroom. Even my heartbeat has faded. There’s only silencesilencesilence.

I’m drifting. Some might call it sleep but I don’t need sleep. The scent of water is trapped in my flaring nostrils. And it’s this I think about, over and over as though I’m pacing the question, back and forth. *Wrong with the water? What’s. With the water? What’s wrong. The water? What’s wrong with. Water? What’s wrong with the. What’s wrong with the water?*