

OUR HOUSE  
LOUISE CANDLISH



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# 1

Friday, 13 January 2017

London, 12.30 p.m.

She must be mistaken, but it looks exactly as if someone is moving into her house.

The van is parked halfway down Trinity Avenue, its square mouth agape, a large piece of furniture sliding down the ribbed metal tongue. Fi watches, squinting into the buttery sunlight – rare for the time of year, a gift – as the object is borne shoulder-high by two men through the gate and down the path.

*My gate. My path.*

No, that's illogical: of course it can't be her house. It must be the Reeces', two down from hers; they put their place on the market in the autumn and no one is quite sure if a sale has gone through. The houses on this side of Trinity Avenue are all built the same – red-brick double-fronted Edwardians in pairs, their owners united in a preference for front doors painted black – and everyone agrees it's easy to miscount.

Once, when Bram came stumbling home from one of his 'quick' drinks at the Two Brewers, he went to the wrong door and she heard through the open bedroom window the scrambling and huffing as her inebriated husband failed to fit his key into the lock of number 87, Merle and Adrian's place. His persistence was staggering, his dogged belief that if he only kept on trying the key *would* work.

'But they all look the same,' he'd protested in the morning.

'The houses, yes, but even a drunk couldn't miss the magnolia,' Fi had told him, laughing. (This was back when she was still amused by his inebriety and not filled with sadness – or disdain, depending on her mood.)

Her step falters: the magnolia. It's a landmark, their tree, a celebrated sight when in blossom and beautiful even when bare, as it is now, the outer twigs etched into the sky with an artist's flair. And it is definitely in the front garden of the house with the van outside.

*Think.* It must be a delivery, something for Bram that he hasn't mentioned to her. Not every detail gets communicated; they both accept that their new system isn't flawless. Hurrying again, using her fingers as a sun visor, she's near enough to be able to read the lettering on the side of the vehicle: PRESTIGE HOME REMOVALS. It *is* a house move, then. Friends of Bram must be dropping something off en route to somewhere. If she were able to choose, it would be an old piano for the boys (*please, Lord, not a drum kit*).

But wait, the deliverymen have reappeared and now more items are being transported from van to house: a dining chair; a large round metallic tray; a box labelled FRAGILE; a small, slim wardrobe the size of a coffin. *Whose things are*

*these?* A rush of anger fires her blood as she reaches the only possible conclusion: Bram has invited someone to stay. Some dispossessed drinking pal, no doubt, with nowhere else to go. ('Stay as long as you like, mate, we've got bags of room.') When the hell was he going to tell her? Well, there's no way a stranger is sharing their home, however temporarily, however charitable Bram's intentions. The kids come first: isn't that the point?

Lately, she worries they've forgotten the point.

She's almost there. As she passes number 87, she's aware of Merle at the first-floor window, face cast in a frown, arm raised for Fi's attention. Fi makes only the briefest of acknowledgements as she strides through her own gate and onto the tiled path.

'Excuse me? What's going on here?' But in the clamour no one seems to hear. Louder now, sharper: 'What are you doing with all this stuff? Where's Bram?'

A woman she doesn't know comes out of the house and stands on the doorstep, smiling. 'Hello, can I help?'

She gasps as if at an apparition. *This* is Bram's friend in need? Familiar by type rather than feature, she is one of Fi's own – though younger, in her thirties – blonde and brisk and cheerful, the sort to roll up her sleeves and take charge. The sort, as history testifies, to constrain a free spirit like Bram. 'I hope so, yes. I'm Fi, Bram's wife. What's going on here? Are you . . . are you a friend of his?'

The woman steps closer, purposeful, polite. 'Sorry, whose wife?'

'Bram's. I mean ex-wife, really.' The correction earns a curious look, followed by the suggestion that the two of

them move off the path and out of the way of ‘the guys’. As a huge bubble-wrapped canvas glides by, Fi allows herself to be steered under the ribs of the magnolia. ‘What on earth has he agreed to here?’ she demands. ‘Whatever it is, I know nothing about it.’

‘I’m not sure what you mean.’ There is a faint puckering of the woman’s forehead as she studies Fi. Her eyes are golden-brown and honest. ‘Are you a neighbour?’

‘No, of course not.’ Fi is becoming impatient. ‘I live here.’

The puckering deepens. ‘I don’t think so. We’re just moving in. My husband will be here soon with the second van. We’re the Vaughans?’ She says it as though Fi might have heard of them, even offers her hand for a formal shake. ‘I’m Lucy.’

Gaping, Fi struggles to trust her ears, the false messages they are transmitting to her brain. ‘Look, I’m the owner of this house and I think I would know if I’d arranged to rent it out.’

The rose-pink of confusion creeps over Lucy Vaughan’s face. She lowers her hand. ‘We’re not *renting* it. We’ve *bought* it.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’

‘I’m not!’ The other woman glances at her watch. ‘Officially, we became the new owners at twelve o’clock, but the agent let us pick up the keys just before that.’

‘What are you talking about? What agent? No agent has keys to my house!’ Fi’s face spasms with conflicting emotions: fear, frustration, anger, even a dark, grudging amusement, because this *must* be a joke, albeit on an epic scale. What else *can* it be? ‘Is this some sort of prank?’ She searches over the woman’s shoulder for cameras, for a phone recording her

bewilderment in the name of entertainment, but finds none – only a series of large boxes sailing past. ‘Because I’m not finding it very funny. You need to get these people to stop.’

‘I have no intention of getting them to stop,’ Lucy Vaughan says, crisp and decisive, just like Fi usually is, when she hasn’t been blindsided by something like *this*. Her mouth turns in vexation before opening in sudden wonder. ‘Wait a minute, Fi, did you say? Is that Fiona?’

‘Yes. Fiona Lawson.’

‘Then you must be—’ Lucy pauses, notices the querying glances from the movers, lowers her voice. ‘I think you’d better come inside.’

And Fi finds herself being ushered through her own door, into her own house, like a guest. She steps into the broad, high-ceilinged hallway and stops short, dumbstruck. This isn’t *her* hall. The dimensions are correct, yes, the silver-blue paint scheme remains the same and the staircase has not moved, but the space has been stripped, plundered of every last item that belongs in it: the console table and antique monks bench, the heap of shoes and bags, the pictures on the walls. And her beloved rosewood mirror, inherited from her grandmother, gone! She reaches to touch the wall where it should be, as if expecting to find it sunk into the plaster.

‘What have you done with all our things?’ she demands of Lucy. Panic makes her strident and a passing mover casts her a correcting sort of look, as if *she* is the threatening one.

‘I haven’t done anything,’ Lucy says. ‘*You* moved your stuff out. Yesterday, I’m assuming.’

‘I did nothing of the sort. I need to look upstairs,’ Fi says, shouldering past her.

‘Well . . .’ Lucy begins, but it isn’t a request. Fi isn’t seeking permission to inspect her own home.

Having climbed the stairs two at a time, she pauses on the upstairs landing, hand still gripping the mahogany curve of the banister rail as if she expects the building to pitch and roll beneath her. She needs to prove to herself she is in the right house, that she hasn’t lost her mind. Good, all doors appear to lead to where they should: two bathrooms at the middle front and rear, two bedrooms on the left and two on the right. Even as she lets go of the banister and enters each room in turn, she still expects to see her family’s possessions where they should be, where they’ve always been.

But there is nothing. Everything they own has vanished, not a stick of furniture left, only indentations in the carpet where twenty-four hours ago the legs of beds and bookcases and wardrobes stood. A bright green stain on the carpet in one of the boys’ rooms from a ball of slime that broke open during a fight one birthday. In the corner of the kids’ shower stands a tube of gel, the kind with tea tree oil – she remembers buying it at Sainsbury’s. Behind the bath taps her fingers find the recently cracked tile (cause of breakage never established) and she presses until it hurts, checking she is still flesh and bone, nerve endings intact.

Everywhere, there is the sharp lemon smell of cleaning fluids.

Returning downstairs, she doesn’t know if the ache has its source inside her or in the walls of her stripped house.

At her approach, Lucy disbands a conference with two of the movers and Fi senses she has rejected their offer of help – to deal with *her*, the intruder. ‘Mrs Lawson? Fiona?’

‘This is unbelievable,’ Fi says, repeating the word, the only one that will do. Disbelief is all that’s stopping her from hyperventilating, tipping into hysteria. ‘I don’t understand this. Please can you explain what the hell is going on here?’

‘That’s what I’ve been trying to do. Maybe if you see the evidence,’ Lucy suggests. ‘Come into the kitchen – we’re blocking the way here.’

The kitchen too is bare, but for a table and chairs Fi has never seen before, and an open box of tea things on the work-top. Lucy is thoughtful enough to push the door to so as not to offend her visitor’s eyes with the sight of the continuing invasion beyond.

*Visitor.*

‘Look at these emails,’ Lucy says, offering Fi her phone. ‘They’re from our solicitor, Emma Gilchrist at Bennett, Stafford and Co.’

Fi takes the phone and orders her eyes to focus. The first email is from seven days ago and appears to confirm the exchange of contracts on 91 Trinity Avenue, Alder Rise, between David and Lucy Vaughan and Abraham and Fiona Lawson. The second is from this morning and announces the completion of the sale.

‘You called him Bram, didn’t you?’ Lucy says. ‘That’s why it took me a minute to realize. Bram’s short for Abraham, of course.’ She has a real letter to hand too, an opening statement of account from British Gas, addressed to the Vaughans at Trinity Avenue. ‘We set up all the utility bills to be paperless, but for some reason they sent this by post.’

Fi returns the phone to her. ‘All of this means nothing. They could be fakes. Phishing or something.’



‘Phishing?’

‘Yes, we had a whole talk about neighbourhood crime a few months ago at Merle’s house and the officer told us all about it. Fake emails and invoices look very convincing now. Even the experts can be taken in.’

Lucy gives an exasperated half smile. ‘They’re real, I promise you. It’s all real. The funds will have been transferred to your account by now.’

‘What funds?’

‘The money we paid for this house! I’m sorry, but I can’t go on repeating this, Mrs Lawson.’

‘I’m not asking you to,’ Fi snaps. ‘I’m *telling* you you must have made a mistake. I’m *telling* you it’s not possible for you to have bought a house that was never for sale.’

‘But it *was* for sale, of course it was. Otherwise, we could never have bought it.’

Fi stares at Lucy, utterly disorientated. What she is saying, what she is *doing*, is complete lunacy and yet she doesn’t *look* like a madwoman. No, Lucy looks like a woman convinced that the person *she* is talking to is the deranged one.

‘Maybe you ought to phone your husband,’ Lucy says, finally.

**Geneva, 1.30 p.m.**

He lies on the bed in his hotel room, arms and legs twitching. The mattress is a good one, designed to absorb sleeplessness, passion, deepest nightmare, but it fails to ease agitation like his. Not even the two antidepressants he’s taken have subdued him. Perhaps it’s the planes making him crazy, the pitiless way

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they grind in and out, one after another, groaning under their own weight. More likely it's the terror of what he's done, the dawning understanding of all that he's sacrificed.

Because it's real now. The Swiss clock has struck. One thirty here, twelve thirty in London. He is now in body what he has been in his mind for weeks: a fugitive, a man cast adrift by his own hand. He realizes that he's been hoping there'll be, in some bleak way, relief, but now the time has come there is something bleaker: none. Only the same sickening brew of emotions he's felt since leaving the house early this morning, somehow both grimly fatalistic and wired for survival.

Oh, God. Oh, Fi. Does she know yet? Someone will have seen, surely? Someone will have phoned her with the news. She might even be on her way to the house already.

He shuffles upright, his back against the headboard, and tries to find a focus in the room. The armchair is red leatherette, the desk black veneer. A return to a 1980s aesthetic, more unsettling than it has any right to be. He swings his legs over the side of the bed. The flooring is warm on bare feet; vinyl or something else man-made. Fi would know what the material is, she has a passion for interiors.

The thought causes a spasm of pain, a new breathlessness. He rises, seeking air – the room, on the fifth floor, is ablaze with central heating – but behind the complicated curtain arrangement the windows are sealed. Cars, white and black and silver, streak along the carriageways between hotel and airport building and, beyond, the mountains divide and shelter, their white peaks tinged peppermint blue. Trapped, he turns once more to face the room, thinking, unexpectedly, of his father. His fingers reach for the armchair, grip

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the seat-back. He does not remember the name of this hotel, which he chose for its nearness to the airport, but knows that it is as soulless a place as he deserves.

Because he's sold his soul, that's what he's done. He's sold his soul.

But not so long ago that he's forgotten how it feels to have one.

## March 2017

Welcome to the website of The Victim, the acclaimed crime podcast and winner of a National Documentary Podcast Listeners' Award. Each episode tells the true story of a crime directly in the words of the victim. The Victim is not an investigation, but a privileged insight into an innocent person's suffering. From stalking to identity theft, domestic abuse to property fraud, the experience of each victim is a terrifying journey that you are invited to share – and a cautionary tale for our times.

Brand new episode 'Fi's Story' is available now! Listen here on the website or on one of multiple podcast apps. And don't forget to tweet your theories as you listen using #VictimFi

Caution: contains strong language

Season Two, Episode Three: 'Fi's Story' > 00:00:00

My name is Fiona Lawson and I'm forty-two years old. I can't tell you where I live, only where I *used* to, because six weeks ago my husband sold our home without my knowledge or consent. I know I should say 'allege', that I should say it before everything, so how about this: I 'allege' that what I say in this interview is the truth. I mean, legal contracts don't lie, do they? And his signature has been authenticated by the experts. Yes, the finer details of the crime are still to be revealed – including the identity of his accomplice – but as you can appreciate I'm still coming to terms with the central fact that I no longer have a home.

*I no longer have a home!*

Of course, once you've heard my story you'll think I have no one to blame but myself – just like your audience will. I know how it works. They'll all be on Twitter saying how clueless I am. And I get it. I listened to the whole of Season One and I did exactly that myself. There's a thin line between a victim and a fool.

'This could have happened to anyone, Mrs Lawson,' the police officer told me the day I found out, but she was just being kind because I was crying and she could see a cup of tea wasn't going to cut it. (Morphine, maybe.)

No, this could only happen to someone like me, someone too idealistic, too forgiving. Someone who'd deluded herself into thinking she could reform nature itself. Make a weak man strong. Yes, that old chestnut.

Why am I taking part in this series? Anyone who knows me will tell you I'm a very private person, so why open myself to

mockery or pity or worse? Well, partly because I want to warn people that this really can happen. Property fraud is on the rise: there are stories in the press every day, the police and legal profession are playing catch-up with technology. Homeowners need to be vigilant: there's no limit to what professional criminals will try – or, for that matter, amateur ones.

Also, this is an ongoing investigation and my story might nudge a memory, might encourage someone who has relevant information to get in touch with the police. Sometimes you don't know what's relevant until you hear the proper context, that's why the police don't mind my doing this – well, they haven't asked me *not* to, let's put it that way. As you probably know, I can't be compelled to testify against Bram in a trial, thanks to spousal privilege (that's a laugh). We're still married, though I've considered us exes since the day I threw him out. Of course, I could *choose* to testify, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, my solicitor says.

To be honest, I get the feeling she thinks there won't ever be any prosecution. I get the feeling she thinks he's got a new identity by now, a new home, a new life – all bought with his new fortune.

She says it's ever-expanding, the lengths to which people will go to cheat one another.

Even husband and wife.

Speaking of which, you said this has a good chance of being heard by him, that it might be the factor that prompts him to get in touch? Well, let me tell you right now, let me tell *him* – and I don't care what the police think:

Don't even think about coming back, Bram. I swear, if you do, I'll kill you.

#VictimFi

@rachelb72 Where's the husband then? Has he done a runner?

@patharrisonuk @rachelb72 He must have disappeared with the cash. Wonder how much the house was worth?

@Tilly-McGovern @rachelb72 @patharrisonuk Her HUSBAND did this? Wow. The world is a dark place.

**Bram Lawson, excerpted from a Word document emailed from Lyon, France, March 2017**

Let me remove any doubt straight away and tell you that this is a suicide note. By the time you read this, I'll have done it. Break the news gently, please. I may be a monster, but I'm still a father and there are two boys who'll be sorry to lose me, who'll have reason to remember me more kindly.

Maybe even their mother too, a one-in-a-million woman whose life must be a nightmare now, thanks to me.

And who, may I say for the record, I have never stopped loving.