

## Edward's Day

Clouds are forming over to the west, above the television mast on the hill, but they look benign. Edward Hadley, in pyjamas and slippers, is standing at his bedroom window, easing the morning stiffness from his neck and shoulders. It won't rain today, he decides. He scans the patchwork of back gardens - no sign of life anywhere yet. He puts on his reading glasses to study the thermometer that hangs outside the window. Overnight minimum fifteen, present temperature eighteen. On this Monday morning in September his only wish is that the day will bring no surprises.

At 8.25, washed and shaved now and wearing his dressing gown, he draws back the curtains in his mother's bedroom, just as he used to when she was alive. Somehow this routine helps him to feel she's still present, still looking after him.

Through the net curtain he watches little Rebecca from next-door-but-one, her ponytail bobbing as she walks in her neat way to the Primary School down by the railway. That girl never looks happy.

For a while he stares at the corner she has just turned, but then shakes himself and diverts his attention to the road below him. Mum never liked to see him get too thoughtful.

Sarah Wingate - her turn for the school run today - is loading four children, one of them her own, into her mud-spattered estate car. As usual the dominant voice is that of Emma Sharpe.

'Shove up, Fat Boy,' she says. She's twelve years old, noticeably developing ahead of her school friends. Yesterday, Sunday, she was on the pavement outside Edward's house with three other girls when he got back from his walk. One of them was sitting on her bike, blocking the gate.

'Get out of the gentleman's way,' Emma ordered her. Then, turning to Edward she said, '*Sadly* Mr Hadley, she's been brought up *badly*.' She planted her hands on her hips, stretching the t-shirt over the little mounds on her chest. Edward hurried to his door, unlocking it with trembling fingers as he heard Emma's final sally, delivered in a stage whisper: 'Actually, Hadley's *madly* in love with me.' The others giggled, the way acolytes do.

"*Don't let your tea get cold, Edward dear.*" His mother's voice. He often hears it, especially in the kitchen. The clock in the front room chimes nine. It's accurate today, but when he winds it next Sunday it will have gained a minute and a half. He's dressed and sitting at the formica-topped table, pouring milk over bran flakes and listening to Radio 4. The newsreader talks of new guidelines for social workers engaged in child protection. The enquiry into another tragic death has just been concluded. 'Place of safety' is a phrase used and an earlier case - that of Maria Colwell - is mentioned. Edward switches it off.

He buttons his cardigan and takes a windcheater from the cupboard under the stairs; gusts up to twenty miles an hour are forecast. The oak-framed mirror by the front door reflects a man in his sixties, of medium height and build, dressed in soft shades of beige and green. The sparse grey hair is closely trimmed. Were someone asked to describe him from a brief sighting they would be hard put to recall any distinguishing feature. After a moment's scrutiny he gives himself a nod of approval. Mum used to look him up and down before nodding in just that way when he was going out.

He skirts round a shrub that's beginning to outgrow the small front garden. It's a philadelphus; he helped his mother to choose it when they moved in. It was a symbol of their new beginning.

The entrance to the Close lies to his right, but Edward turns left to follow a narrow path that runs between two of the houses and provides a short cut to the Heath. Once there he follows his habitual route, a little under two miles by his estimation. He nods in response to the greeting of another regular walker, a tall woman who exercises a decrepit King Charles spaniel called Sophie. Near the pond he notices a slightly-built boy of about seven or eight, evidently off school today for some reason. Under the eye of his dad he's trying to launch a kite much bigger than himself.

"I told you boy, keep the line taut, then let it out, a bit at a time." The father is losing patience. The kite dives to the ground before the lad manages to play out the cord.

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Yes, Father." The boy sounds miserable. Edward doesn't stay to watch. On the Heath he keeps up a brisk pace. A man without a dog can attract notice if he's seen to loiter.

He is relieved to find the pavements empty when he returns. The wind has dropped and the fragrant smell of the philadelphus meets him at the gate. Mum used to love that orange-blossom scent.

Edward was eight years old when the two of them sought refuge in this quiet neighbourhood - their place of safety. The house is semi-detached, with just the two bedrooms and a box room upstairs. They were fortunate in their silent neighbour, Mary Possett; no sound ever came through the party wall.

Soon after their arrival Mum was persuaded by a door-to-door salesman to buy a set of Children's Encyclopaedias. Those colourful volumes performed a kind of miracle in turning her son's mind from the past and awakening the curiosity that still carries him through the day. For fifty-four years they lived here in quiet harmony, keeping the world at a distance.

With Mum's encouragement Edward entered the profession of accountancy, becoming a zealous auditor of company accounts. To him every new set of financial records was a potential web of deceit and at the end of each day she would wait eagerly to hear what his investigations had turned up. As they sat with their evening cup of tea they would gloat over the clever deceptions, sometimes swindles, that had failed to fool him.

Back from the Heath, in the sanctuary of his home, he follows his routine. He feels his mother's presence as he prepares a light meal of pate with toast and an apple. 'My turn to clear up,' he tells her when he has finished. Then he sinks into his deep armchair. It's in the back room, where the sounds of the Close don't penetrate. But today there are noises from next door.

A month before Mum died, Mary Possett was taken to live in a Home. She'd had a fall and was considered too frail to live alone. Now a younger person has moved in, an artist he was told. She seems to work at home; there's no regular pattern to her comings and goings. Surreptitious glimpses from his window suggest that she is about forty-five. She dresses in a colourful, arty way; her hair, streaked with grey, is abundant and unruly.

Edward picks up his cloth-bound copy of Little Dorritt. He has a shelf of novels that have served him as escape over the years. Dickens is his favourite. The familiar stories are comforting; to read something new would worry him. But today he can't settle to his book. Images are invading his mind: the timid boy on the Heath with his kite; the sad figure of little Rebecca, always alone; poor Maria Colwell, seven years old when she met her awful fate.

Louder noises are coming through the wall now. She's moving things about, the sound of dragging on an uncarpeted floor. Her radio is on, a man's voice, it's harsh.

Edward's heartbeat is quickening, his hands grip the coarse material of the chair. Suddenly a door bangs.

*He's eight years old, squeezed into the space between the sofa and the window. He's chewing at the ear of Monty, his threadbare teddy, shivering with fear. If only he could make himself smaller.*

*It's worse than usual this time, much worse. The way he looked when he went after her, up the stairs. Now he's shouting: 'I know what you're up to – bitch!' Then Mum's voice, pleading, 'No. No Jack, please.' On and on it goes, louder and louder. A piercing shriek comes from Mum. It seems to echo in his head, over and over, though it only came once. He's frozen in his terror; his limbs won't move.*

*There's a thud, then silence. No more voices. A door is slammed and a spasm jerks the body of the crouching boy. Heavy feet are thumping down the stairs, closer and closer.*

*'Hiding? Are you hiding from me, boy?' He's growling like an animal. 'Come out here, you sly little bugger!' He's in the front room now, kicking and swiping at everything about him. A nest of tables goes over, then a lamp. A photo flies from the mantelpiece.*

*Now he's been spotted. Father's face is deathly pale, the lips wet and shiny. He trips on something as he lunges towards the sofa. In desperation the boy turns to the window behind him. A face is there! It's Mr Chapman, from the garage, his huge hands pressed against the pane, peering in.*

Edward sits up and looks about him, trying to come out of the past, to slow his breathing. He picks up his book from the floor where it fell and then makes himself take in, one by one, the details of the room. On the brick fireplace is Mum's photo, with that distant look that you might take for serenity if you didn't know her. On the wall opposite is the watercolour, "Kentish Scene with Oast House." He bought that for her with his first salary. All around is the wallpaper, "Roses and Peonies" it was called, one of his first attempts at paper-hanging. Rose was Mum's name.

This room, indeed this house, is Edward's cave. No one ever enters it, nor did they when Mum was here. He crawls back to it each day after looking at the lives that others live. On the Heath and in the shops he sees the couples and the families; he sees hands that touch, caress, embrace, and he turns away.

More images are coming from that terrible day, he can't keep them out: Father in a straight jacket, rendered powerless and removed for good. Mum on a stretcher, looking dead.

With an effort Edward summons up a warmer picture: the Chapman family. The weeks – or were they months? - spent at their house. Uncle Bob, as he learned to call him, all a father should be – strong and kind and never frightening, the guardian of the community. Bob's wife Carmen, loving in a different way from Mum, hugging and calling him '*bellissimo*'. For years he banished those kind people from his thoughts. Good memories had to be forgotten too, if the bad ones were to be kept out.

He gets to his feet and steadies himself with a hand on the mantelpiece. His eyes scan the room. He's looking for his father, but there's nothing of him here; Mum made sure of that.

He makes for the stairs. The flight is steep and he goes up on all fours, the reading glasses swinging from a chain round his neck. Into Mum's room, still as it was the day she died. His eye goes to the bamboo cabinet beside the bed, with its two deep drawers. Since her death he's respected the privacy of those drawers, but now he grabs the handle and opens the bottom one.

Inside are some parchment folders, tied with ribbon – financial matters, as the labels tell him. He shuts that drawer and pulls the top one open. Here are Mum's mementoes of her son, secretly preserved from the dark and fearful years. He unfolds a crumpled sheet of grey sugar paper, on it a child's scribble in red crayon and the caption 'Mum' written by the teacher. He turns it this way and that; maybe she could see herself in it, he can't. Then the first school photo, aged five or six, an unruly tuft of hair sticking up. Mum was livid about that.

Here's another photo – in this he's maybe seven – in baggy khaki shorts, an awkward-looking boy. One hand shields his eyes, the other grips the front of his aertex shirt. They were on the beach at Littlehampton, just him and Mum, stealing a rare day away. Father was in hospital; Edward was never told why.

That day stands out in his memory. For just a couple of hours in the afternoon Mum seemed to throw off her cares. At the Amusement Park she came with him on all the roundabouts and rides and made him laugh along with her. They squeezed into a bumper car and she let him drive. Then they went to a cafe and they both had sausage, egg and chips. Mum ordered a pot of tea and said it was the best she ever tasted.

Next Edward picks up a green dinky toy and places it on the palm of his hand, feeling its weight. No need to turn it over to know its a Lagonda and that his initials are scratched underneath. In that little car he drove far, far away, to all the places in his picture books.

He puts aside the box that contains these items and from the drawer lifts out the navy blue drawstring bag in which he used to carry his plimsolls. Memories of the school gymnasium make him wince. He feels inside the bag and his heart stops. It's Monty, his beloved companion. He lifts him out by the ears and holds him against his face. His Monty smell is overlaid now by Mum's jasmine scent. He sits on the bed and addresses his teddy in the clipped, high-pitched voice he always used for their chats. 'Well, Monty old chum, nasty scrape, eh? All well now though.' He props his teddy up on Mum's pillow.

She took away everything that harked back to the bad times, always trying to divert his mind with something new. Those thrilling encyclopedias were her substitute for the bedraggled Monty.

A single blue envelope is tucked against the side of the drawer and Edward recognises the bold, sloping scrawl of his father. He grabs it and raises his spectacles with a shaking hand. First he pulls out a photo – a young man in the uniform of an aircraftman. He's posed in front of a wartime Spitfire, feet apart, hands joined behind him in the 'at ease' position. It's his father, newly enrolled for National Service. He feels a clawing at his stomach; it's that mouth – the way it lifts at one corner, with a smirk. He hears his own child's voice, 'Yes Father. Sorry Father.' No way to please him. The letter is headed 'RAF Cardington'. Edward reads:

*My dear Rose,*

*Here I am then. What do you think? We all got one taken like this. Do I look like a pilot?*

*Its cushy at this place but will be different next week when we go to square bashing camp. Its Hednesford for our lot they say its the worst.*

*We got loads of bulling to do its stupid. My boots are coming on great. We use a hot spoon to get the toe caps smooth. You should see the sergeants – their like glass.*

*Cant say Ive kept my nose clean so far. Sorry to say. The chaps in the billet are so ruddy cheerful always on about their families. Proud of their dads that*

*kind of thing and you know what that does to me. If you'd have been here you'd have shaken sense into me you're the only one who can. I tried to make it up with the chap afterwards. Hope nothing's going to happen. They'll be getting at me at square bashing that's what they do. I will think about you and try not to lose my rag. When we were together I'll be OK I promise you.*

*Good luck for the interview. They'll be impressed by your School Certs for sure. You're made for a nurse, Rose. Tell me how you got on. Tell me something to keep me on the strait and narrow.*

*With lots of love*

*Jack*

He drops the letter on the bed. Both hands go to his head, scratching above his ears until the hair sticks out in all directions. He gets up and crosses the landing to his bedroom. He leans against the window frame. The sky is turning a rosy pink behind the television mast. Matching grey jogging suits flutter on the line next door and away to his right Mr Fernandes is in his vegetable patch, pulling weeds. None of this holds his interest. He's not looking to the world outside for distraction now.

He's thinking of that sheet of blue paper, thinking that not one but two men were the victims of their fathers. Two lives robbed of what they might have been. What had his own career amounted to? A mean pursuit of other people's frailties.

And what about poor Mum? She tried to protect one man from his fury and the other from his fear. In the end she failed at both.

The doorbell rings. His legs react and carry him down the stairs. He ignores the spyhole – his usual precaution when his privacy is threatened - and opens the door.

'Hi, it's me - from next door. Come to say hello.' The voice is bright, the eyes alive. Edward stares at her. Getting no reply, she looks at him more closely. 'Are you OK? Is this a bad time? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

He shakes his head. 'Sorry. I don't mean to be rude. I'm Edward.' His feet shift uneasily on the mat.

'Vanessa. Can I come in?'

'Yes, yes of course.' There's no room for her to pass him in the narrow passage, so he turns and leads the way into the front room. He gestures towards an armchair, but she is already making for the bay window, where two chairs face each other.

'This is nice. Your lookout post, eh?' She stands at the window. 'Busy out there today. You can tell me who's who – give me all the gossip.' She gives a wave to Emma, who is on the pavement, gazing in, bold as ever. 'I like that girl. She's a laugh.'

'Would you like something?' Edward's voice comes out louder than he intended. 'I could put the kettle on.'

'What else have you got? Anything stronger?' She smiles. 'This is an occasion. We're going to be living either side of that wall.'

'There is a bottle of sherry, I think.'

'Great. We'll hit the sherry, shall we?' She sits down while he fetches little crystal glasses and the bottle of Tio Pepe.

'Careful.' She puts a hand over his to steady the bottle as he pours. Edward drops into his chair. Deep inside he's shaking. He takes a sip from his glass, hoping it will calm him.

'I heard your mum died,' Vanessa says. Edward looks down at his hands.

'That's tough. I expect you're still coming to terms with it – that she's gone.' After a moment she continues, 'One day I'm going to get you to tell me all about her. But not

now. Shall we live dangerously and have another sherry?' She has knocked hers back in a single gulp.

She asks about his work and he tells her briefly what he used to do.

'So - you're an accountant. I shall be picking your brains, I expect. I'm self-employed and my books are all over the place.' Edward makes no reply.

Vanessa looks out. 'That's Mrs Rickman isn't it? I've met her. I wish she'd put some oil on that buggy. Do you know her?'

'No.'

She looks him in the eye. 'You keep to yourself, don't you Edward?'

Again he is silent..

'Don't worry. I can respect that.' She looks around the room and a gleam comes into her eye. 'Hey - you know what I think? I bet you never come into this room.'

Edward gives a wry smile, looks over to the mantelpiece. 'I come in to wind that clock on Sundays.'

'I'll take another guess. You never cook for yourself. Am I right? Just toast and stuff out of tins?' Edward doesn't deny it.

'Look, I'm new to this part of the world. You could help me out over lots of things. In exchange I'll cook you a meal one day - what d'you say? You mustn't hide away too much, you know.'

In the quiet of his kitchen Edward pours tomato soup into a bowl and slots two slices of bread in the toaster. Before he sits down he breaks two eggs into a pan of water; they'll be poached just right by the time he finishes the soup.

Later, when he has cleared away, he doesn't linger in the kitchen. Too much has happened today; he won't let himself think about it, not now anyway.

'Early night for me,' he says. He's listening for Mum's voice. But tonight there is only silence.