

The Kick

Barbara has an itch, but she doesn't want to scratch. Even if she did, she wouldn't be able to, so it's just as well. The itch is in a place she cannot reach. It's like a moth deep inside her, fluttering. Once upon a time it would have driven her to distraction, but now it simply makes her smile. It's a reminder of something. It's a reminder of something she wants to remember.

They'll be organising that place for her now at whatsisname village. They've been waiting for this, this proof that she can't look after herself, and they surely have it now. They are, of course, only thinking of her. It'll be easy enough to move her out. Most of the work has already been done. The only furniture left is what was hers in the first place, that and a few other items that have been deemed the bare minimum to sustain her until she leaves.

Here she stands, a stranger in her own house (although it's not really her own). She stands around like a ghost while members of her sister's family inspect what is on offer. It's stifling hot inside with all the people and the clutter. They've opened the windows but it makes little difference because there is hardly any breeze out there. Hopefully there will be a southerly along later.

Barbara is looking forward to getting rid of some of the clutter. When they moved in, her sister brought all the furniture from the property, which had space to spare. Although she gave a lot of it away there is still far too much for a house this size. Everything is now marked with red or white stickers. Red means it can be taken away today (there is a van waiting outside for the purpose). White means it is available, but stays in the house until Barbara leaves. And then there are the things that will go with her, stickerless, principally her old armchair and the little TV. These, withered fruit of her eighty-one years, were always hers.

Some of these people she only knows from photos. They all seem to know her. They greet her by name. There is even the occasional peck on the cheek. Overseeing the day are her sister's sons, Andrew and Neil - her nephews (to her the word still brings up an image of small boys in shorts). The stickers were Neil's idea. He watches with quiet satisfaction as they all move through the house, like people at an auction. Neil is the younger of the two and has battled all his life to make his mark against his smarter, quieter, inscrutable older brother. Now their mother is gone and her worldly goods are being disbursed. The grandchildren are starting to set up homes of their own. Nice old items of furniture will take pride of place among brick and plank bookshelves and self-assembly computer desks.

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Her nephews jolly her along, speaking slowly and clearly as though she is deaf, or gormless, or possibly a child. She lived with them for several years when they were young, and lately she has been living with their mother, but even so she has only ever been a peripheral figure to them. (Both their wives refer to her as 'poor' Aunt Barbara.) Unless, like today, it is unavoidable, they now prefer to pretend she doesn't exist in case their secret disdain for her shows through and makes them guilty. Now Neil is explaining to her the thinking behind the stickers. Under the terms of the will, he stresses, she is allowed to stay in the house as long as she is capable of looking after herself. Even as he says these words she feels she is being scrutinised for signs that she is not. Andrew has even given her the name of a doctor he knows in the area. Anything, he says, anything at all, just mention his name. Yes, she thinks, mention his name and he'll reach straight for the drawer where he keeps the certificates: 'In my professional opinion, Miss Barbara Bain is no longer...' The place is worth well over a million for land value alone. With one of his town house developments, Andrew reckons he could double it. Jean and her husband bought the place back in the early sixties for a holiday home, harvest of a couple of decent seasons. When they retired they surprised everybody by selling the property and moving in here permanently. Then, when he died she surprised them all again by asking her shiftless sister to move in with her. An act of charity it might have seemed, but Barbara feels they both gained something from the arrangement. For herself, these years have been the happiest of her life. She has never felt more stable, more robust. And now, all too suddenly, they are over.

So, Neil is saying, we thought you'd need the table, and just a couple of the chairs and things. We can't have you eating off the floor can we? And Barbara pretends not to hear his little joke just to spare herself the trouble of laughing. She knows they would be more than happy to see her eating off the floor. With that kind of behaviour they would need no further excuse to put her into whatsisname village. Andrew took them to see it last year, when Jean was still well. He had some interest in the place, she can't remember what exactly. But she can remember Jean's first remark on seeing the institutional dining area; 'Shoot me if I ever get like that.' They giggled the rest of the way around, at the tiny 'apartments' with their tasteful chrome handrails, and the restful plants in the lobby ('when someone dies,' said Jean. 'They just pick off a few leaves and hey presto, another wreath!'), at the idea of the nurses rushing from one emergency to the next as the inmates pressed their buzzers at night.

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Every new feature Andrew pointed out seemed to be another cause for mirth. He took it in good heart. He was able to trump his mother with the simple observation that the place was making a fortune.

It is as though the family are in a different dimension from Barbara as they move about the house. Each of them has at least one other person with whom they can swap confidential remarks. Barbara starts to feel a sense of disconnection, as though she has been cut adrift from her anchor. A not unfamiliar feeling. She would like to sit down but can't, not yet. The chairs, even the one that belongs to her, are not available to be sat on right now. Then suddenly she is taken by the elbow and steered into the kitchen.

'Come on Barb, let's go and make some tea.' It's Maria, eight months pregnant, the wife or partner (she's not sure which) of Andrew's eldest. Maria is very young, barely out of her teens. Her skin is smooth and creamy, almost perfect. She asks Barbara where she keeps the cups and Barbara points to one of the two cupboards that she knows. This was Jean's territory, almost exclusively. When she fell ill they relied on takeaway chicken and since her death Barbara has eaten mostly toast. Maria bustles around the kitchen opening and closing cupboards, peering into the backs of shelves. It is very hot. She digs out a teapot and various extra mugs. Watching her do this gives Barbara a feeling of the narrowness of her own horizons and great swathes of experience she has missed. Jean, it occurs to her, would have been a great-grandmother if she had held on a few more weeks.

Maria chats to Barbara as though they are resuming a conversation that was broken off from before. In fact they have only met once before this. She is engagingly disrespectful towards her family, her father-in-law, even her husband. The feeding frenzy, she calls what is going on in the other room. Her husband has his eye on the leather Chesterfield sofa. As the eldest grandchild he believes it should have been his, that first choice of the loot is his birthright. But Neil has other ideas. He has devised a system whereby they draw names out of a hat to determine the order of choice. Neil wants nothing to do with systems that favour the first-born. Barbara was born first in her family but she cannot recall a single incident where it told to her advantage. All she can recall is Jean's gradual assumption of the role of elder sibling as she embarked on her own lifelong struggle to cope.

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There's a fresh breeze along the cliff top walk. Perhaps the southerly is on its way. Maria and Barbara progress slowly, taking frequent rests on the benches that mark the route. Here they come, leaning on each other for support. Maria has the straight-backed, splay-footed walk of the heavily pregnant. Barbara has rickety knees. There's an operation she could have done but she doesn't see the point at her age. Way below them the sea is a deep clean blue. It undulates like a living thing, pregnant in itself. Jean used to say it felt like coming home when she moved down here, and it had been Barbara's idea that her ashes should be scattered from this cliff edge. But Andrew and Neil have recently taken her out to the property where they grew up. They had to get permission from the new owners, who were understandably reluctant to have a complete stranger fertilising their lawn for ever more, but were happy for her to be scattered anywhere else as long as they were not told where it was. It's what she would have wanted, they said, and who was Barbara to disagree?

Maria is excited about her baby. A child is all she has ever wanted. 'How about yourself Barb,' she says, stroking her huge belly. 'Did you ever want a child?' Well, Barbara thinks, no one has ever asked her that question before. Not to say she's never thought about it, but in her day a husband was generally considered a prerequisite for thoughts of that kind, let alone the act, so even that dull tweak she felt all those years ago when she was allowed to hold the infant Andrew was accompanied by a guilty pang. She says something neutral in response. She has never really been in a position to think about it. Neutral but true. Nowadays women in her position have other options. It's as easy as going to the supermarket, or so it would appear. She wonders if she would have been tempted. Was that the right word, tempted? Yes, she thought it was.

Sometimes, in the mirror, she catches sight of her own belly as she steps out of the shower. Among the veins and wrinkles it is firm and convex, shaped like the lid of a small saucepan. Never used but yellowed with age, it puts her in mind of a birdless egg.

Suddenly Maria gives a little gasp. She holds her belly. 'What is it?' Barbara asks, concerned. But Maria's face is warm and flushed and she is smiling. 'The little bugger's kicking me,' she says. 'Here.' She takes Barbara's fingers and places them against her. At first all Barbara can feel is the warmth of Maria's skin, warmth that gradually resolves itself into the subtle rhythm of blood flow, heartbeat perhaps. She

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thinks this kicking must be something equally as subtle, something that is only available for a mother to feel, deep down in her mysterious womb. Then it is as if something – yes, a miniature foot, why not? – is pushing out from the inside with all its strength. She feels the imprint against her fingertips. It is quite incredible. She looks at Maria. When she looks away again some seconds later she is surprised to feel her face still set in a rictus of delight.

Back at the house the feeding frenzy is over. Selected items of furniture are being loaded onto a van from which they are to be distributed among various homes. Maria's husband has his Chesterfield after all. He is thrilled. He greets Maria with a kiss and a cuddle. Maria gives Barbara a wink, but Barbara feels happy for him. She is happy that he should get so much pleasure out of owning the sofa on which his grandmother, her sister, spent most of those last few days before she finally took to her bed. She is pleased, too, at how the day has gone for Andrew and Neil. Her nephews stride about, oiling the family gears with benign patriarchal suggestions. They are happy that there have been no fights, hardly even a raised voice, but their twin airs of ultimate authority leave no doubt that they could have dealt with them if they had occurred. Barbara makes for the kitchen. She will offer them tea again, she thinks, and this time she will make it herself.

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Late in the afternoon, Barbara rises from her chair. The house is empty once again, the southerly has come through and the air is cool and clean. There are large new areas of bare space and the light streams through the big windows onto the polished floorboards. It is as though it has been wiped clean ready for the next phase of its existence.

As she walks across the room her knee locks. The pain shoots all the way up her thigh, and stays. Barbara gasps. She should not have been so eager to help Maria down those steps. But given the same situation, she knows she'd do it again. She'd take the weight. Maria has promised to bring the baby to visit her after it is born. She would say that of course, and Barbara is accustomed to sudden plan changes but she believes Maria will be true to her word. She wonders where that visit will take place, here or in whatsisname village.

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She is moaning now. She would reign it in if there was anyone else here, but there isn't. She has the doctor's number, it's on Andrew's business card next to the phone, just over by the window. He was adamant about writing it out. You don't mess about with your health, he said, and this guy is good. At the village, of course, there are medical staff on call all the time. You don't even have to dial a number. There are special green buzzers all over the place.

At the village she would have her own cosy rooms, one for sitting, one for sleeping, plus her own little bathroom. There is a big dining room where she would be able to take all her meals, and various other places where she can meet with the other villagers. Barbara grits her teeth and tries to transfer her weight. It's no good. If the furniture was still here she could use it to sidle around the room. The phone is only two steps away. Perhaps if she allows herself to fall she will be able to crawl across and reach it. At the village the buzzers are specially positioned for people who have falls. You only have to press one and they come running. Barbara need never be alone again. It will be like living with a family. She considers for a minute, then lets herself fall.

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