

Eight Hours

The Short Story Reinvented

Legend  Press
Independent Book Publisher

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All characters, other than those clearly in the public domain, and place names, other than those well-established such as towns and cities, are fictitious and any resemblance is purely coincidental.

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The Short Story Reinvented

Legend Press' unique short fiction series, 'The Short Story Reinvented', is designed for today's busy, but discerning, reader. Short fiction is a perfect answer in a world where everyone wants things to be easily accessible, sleek and tailored to fit their needs.

High-quality, thought-provoking short fiction can perfectly fill what before may have been an enforced gap of 'dead-time' in a daily routine. Dipping into short fiction on a commute or during a lunch break is not as daunting as delving into a thick novel when you know that you might soon be interrupted mid-chapter; yet the subject matter in this popular series is weighty and meaningful, providing something new to think about and feel inspired about for the rest of the day, week, month and year.

Legend Press receives hundreds of submissions for the collections, from all over the UK and around the world including the US, Norway, Italy, New Zealand and South Africa. The successful entries for each book are chosen so that the stories combine and contrast compellingly to make the most varied, yet at the same time the most cohesive, collection possible.

*The other collections in the series are:
The Remarkable Everyday (ISBN 9780955103209)
and Seven Days (ISBN 9780955103230)*

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5am

**Hush Little
Baby**

By Josie Henley-Einion

It's five. If I fall asleep now then I've got like two and a half hours till the alarm goes off. That should be enough. I'm sure I could cope. It's only Thursday, no PE. At least I'll have had some sleep. Not like last time when I couldn't drop off at all. Still I managed to survive the whole day, only nodded a bit in Maths. Not that anyone noticed.

I just need to fall asleep now. That's all.

Try counting sheep, she says. I've done sheep, cows, pigs, chickens, the whole bloody barnyard. Even started on zebras and hippos. She's full of shit. Thinks I'm watching too much TV, drinking too much coke, got too many hormones, god knows what. What does she know? Does she lie awake night after night? No, she snores like a warthog in a snoring competition. What am I supposed to say when she complains about me yawning at breakfast? Mother dear, I'm kept awake by that godawful racket you make like you're trying to drill a hole through the wall between us. Like yeah, that would go down well wouldn't it?

And if it's not her then it's something else. Twittering bloody birds outside the window, the cat licking his bits making slurping noises, rattling trains screeching over leaves on the line, helicopters chasing criminals and god knows what else. I swear I can hear the stars popping out, like ping ping ping. God I wish I could sleep.

My pillow is too hot. I lean up on my elbows and turn it over, sink gratefully into the cool soft fleshy fuzz. I drift. I've been trying to meditate, to calm my brain and think pleasant thoughts. Maybe if I just try not to think about anything, try

to blank my mind, then it'll happen. I'll sleep.

I can't empty my mind. I try. I push all the thoughts over to one side and get a big empty space. But it fills again. Like water leaking through the gaps in a lock. Like a tiny squeak that you wouldn't normally notice but when everything else is quiet it takes over your whole brain. Like forcing all your old toys and games into a cupboard and it's door creaks and groans and suddenly springs open. Then you've got stuff flying over the room and you find a headless doll that you used to love and the last piece from a jigsaw that you've already thrown out and before you know it the room is full of crap again and I'm totally not managing to keep a blank mind at all.

The problem with trying not to think about something is that as soon as you tell yourself not to think about it, you're already thinking about it. I fill my head with other stuff. All day I fill my head. I read read read. I study study study. If I can think about anything else, anything at all then I can stop thinking about the thing that I don't want to think about.

My pillow is still hot. Turn it over. Turn it over again. Turn it over. Turnitover. I push the pillow off the bed and lie on the bare sheet. Cool sheet covering shiny mattress. Uncle Tom Cobbly gets up in a huff and stalks over to my desk where he perches like an Egyptian temple cat giving me the evil.

Calm calm try to be calm. Try to just breathe. Just breathe and nothing. Nothing else. Nothing in my head. Nothing.

I drift for some minutes.

Nothing. Nothing a big pile of nothing. Snap, my brain fires something in. Images, faces emerging. Push it away. Put it in the cupboard. Nothing. Eyes closed tight. Concentrate on nothing. Tight tight concentrate. Think nothing think nothing think nothink thinknothink. Ping, in comes another thought. Fire it out. Smash it down. Like a mallet on the moles in the arcade. Bang. Another thought. Bang. Another image. Bang! Like Lady Macbeth's dog. Out, out damned Spot!

It's no good. I turn over. I'm on my back. I can't not think.

I have to think something. Okay. Try another tactic. I'm floating. Imagine I'm floating. Drift away drift away floaty floaty float. I turn over onto my stomach. My arms out. I'm floating floaty light.

I imagine that I'm soaring over the village, over the school, the church, the river. All the people are under me, no one sees me but I see them. I see what they're doing and I see their thoughts in speech bubbles above their heads. The vicar is farting, thinking about his dog. Vera in the bakery is laying out cakes laced with poison, chuckling to herself about the greedy customers getting sick.

Children are walking to school, dancing and skipping. Thinking about their friends and their dinners. Feeding horses in the field and laughing at the angry geese. The old man is at the park gates, hiding. I'm floating, I'm floating like an angel. I'm a guardian angel looking down on them all.

There is Debbie, delightful, delicious Debbie. Swinging her bag as she walks over the bridge. Flouncing her hair like she does when she knows she's being watched. I'm watching, I'm watching. If only she knew, but she doesn't, and I make sure of that. We're friends, just friends. None of that monkey business, not for pure little me. Yeah, right. I swoop down lower and lower. I see her. I feel her. I breathe her. Then she looks up. She looks up my angel skirt.

Heart pounding, I gasp, grasping the covers. Did she see? Did she see? Didshesee?

Oh god now I'm never going to sleep. Why did I have to go and think about Debbie? Now I'm hot all over. Every night I say I'm not going to think about her. Every bloody night I spend the whole night not thinking about her. When am I going to get her out of my head?

I'm a fallen angel. I laugh. I laugh out loud. Cover my mouth hold my breath. Did she hear me? Did I wake her up? No. She stopped snoring but now she's turned over and it's started again. The wall vibrates like it's tissue paper stretched

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over a comb and Granddad is playing it at Christmas. And he's laughing and I'm opening my presents and everyone is happy. But it's not. It's just a wall and it's vibrating because it's too thin because this flat is crap because it's not our house and Granddad isn't here and it's all crap.

Why did we have to move to this godforsaken hole in the universe? Why couldn't we stay in the village? Mother dear, snoring mother, ugly fat noisy ugly mother sold the house, rented a shoebox flat in the stinking noisy fat ugly city. Why couldn't we stay in the village? Why can't I sleep?

Uncle Tom Cobbly creeps back onto the bed. He snuggles up next to my leg and I can feel his purr vibrating through my duvet. He doesn't stay annoyed with me for very long. I put my hand down to stroke him and he rubs against it for a few seconds but then bites my finger. Ow. Bad tempered old bag. Maybe he's not getting enough sleep either. Cats are supposed to be able to sleep sixteen hours a day, I read it on the internet. What's wrong, Uncle Tom, am I depriving you? Have you only had fourteen hours today?

I stare at the LED display on my clock. 05:09. I close my eyes and the digits are burnt into my retina. 05:09. I open my eyes. 05:09. I close my eyes. 05:09. I close my eyes tighter. 05:09 moves up and to the left. I move my eyes and 05:09 moves down again. 05:09 spins. 05:09 begins to fade. I open my eyes. 05:09. I close my eyes. 05:09 shines brightly, moves, spins. I open my eyes. 05:10. If I go to sleep now I'll have two hours and twenty minutes of sleep.

I need the loo. I need to go again. When did I go last? About three o'clock I think. Two hours ago. I shouldn't have had that handful of water. But I was thirsty. I get so thirsty at nights. So hot and lying awake all night makes me thirsty and I have to drink and I have to pee. I don't think I can sleep without peeing. But if I get up now for the toilet then I'll be wide awake when I get back. But I'm wide awake now. Sod it.

I get up. Uncle Tom flies off the bed again. I walk to the door. I bang into the wall. I've been here a few weeks and I still can't get used to the size of this box that we call my bedroom. I open the door. I take two steps. I open the bathroom door. I take one step. I sit on the toilet. I'm naked. I'm cold. Shivering. I need a pee. I can't go. I turn on the tap. Listen to the trickle of water. Lean on the sink. I go. It burns. Maybe I'm dehydrated. I take a sip of water from the tap as I stand. A tiny sip.

I step back to my room. I fall onto my bed. I drag the duvet over me. I grab my pillow from the floor. It's cool again. I put it over my head. Turn to the wall. Sleep. I've got to sleep. I really have to. Can't keep on like this.

When I was a kid and I couldn't sleep, Granddad used to sing to me. Hush little baby don't say a word. I wasn't a little baby but I liked the song. I think about it now. I think about his voice. I try to remember his voice. I try to remember his face before the stroke. It's difficult to remember because every time I think about Granddad I get the unwanted thoughts. The ones when he's ill and thin and his face is collapsed and he can't talk and he's in the care home and I was glad when he finally died because it was better for him.

Turn on my side. Press the pillow into my ear to keep out the noise. I wish I could press it all the way into my ear and through to my brain and muffle the thoughts. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to think about Granddad and I don't want to think about Debbie and I don't want to think about what Debbie said about Granddad and I don't want to think about what Mum said about Debbie.

Shut up! Shut up! Stop thinking about it! Stop it stop it stopit.

Hush little baby don't say a word. Granddad's gonna buy you a mocking bird. Sleep. God if I could just sleep. It wouldn't be so bad if I'd already left school. I could stay up all night reading, studying, whatever. If I could work to my

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own routine instead of this stupid set routine that we're all supposed to work to but it's artificial because in the old days people just worked when there was sunlight and slept when there wasn't. If I could work all summer and sleep all winter. If I was living in the North Pole. If there weren't any other people around. If I had some peace. If she would just stop snoring.

Bloody bloody hell! I throw the pillow off me again. It goes to the end of the bed. I sit up. I turn over. I lie on my side. Look at the clock. 05:14 blink 05:15 it changes. Blip blip.

I get this weird feeling that I'm being watched. Like the hairs prickling on the back of my neck. I turn around but there's only the wall. I sit up. Uncle Tom Cobbley is parked on the box at the bottom of the bed sitting upright but swaying as if he's hypnotised himself. Maybe he's trying to hypnotise me? Maybe he's saying, 'You are feeling sleeepy. Goooo toooo sleeeep.'

Yes, yes and yes. In the greater scheme of things when there are people dying of starvation and they can't get clean water, one girl not being able to sleep at night is not really that significant. But for me it is. For me it takes over my whole body, my whole world. It stops me functioning properly and it makes me obsessed with minute details. It makes me start to think of things that I shouldn't be thinking about and it makes me imagine things that aren't there, or were never there or were they?

I'm going to be no good in school tomorrow. No good at all. I know I can't think straight when I've had no sleep. I can't think straight anyway. I think all bendy and wiggledy and all over the place, with sleep or without. What lessons have I got? Biology I know that. Double maths, computers. I got my bag ready but I can't remember seeing the biology book. I checked at two o'clock for the maths and computers books but can't remember seeing biology. I get up. I sit on the end of the bed. I pull my bag over. Sift through the books. Get

everything out one by one. Maths. Biology. Computers. Pencil case. Long ruler that doesn't fit in the pencil case. Chemistry, what's chemistry doing in there? I don't have chemistry on a Thursday. Take it out. English lit, Shakespeare bloody *Hamlet*. That's all. That's it. Don't need any more. Zip up the bag. Put it back. Lie back down. Get up again. Didn't see my snack. Check the pocket of the bag. There's the pack of oatcakes. Of course. I put them in there so they wouldn't get crushed. Put the bag back. Lie back down. Uncle Tom Cobby steps cautiously onto the very bottom of the bed and begins to circle, purring and pricking the duvet.

Why do I have to study bloody Shakespeare? What's Shakespeare got to do with people living today? All that to be or not to be nonsense. It's got nothing to do with me. Nothing at all. I don't even know what to be or not to be means. What does it mean? Am I dead or alive? Is it better to be alive and miserable or dead and happy? Something like that. But that doesn't make sense at all. Or maybe it does. Maybe it's got everything to do with me. If they could just update it a bit. Put it on the internet. Youtube it. Then it would be interesting. Somebody said they'd done a graphic novel. So it's probably already on the internet. But in my school they're still working from battered textbooks with scribbles that are years old. Nothing fancy for us. No internet. Even in computers you can't go on the internet. Well you can, but every time you try to access something interesting you get blocked. At least I can use it at home. It's about the only good thing about this crappy place.

I read on the internet that there are multiple universes and that every possibility of what might happen in your life is happening to another you somewhere else in another dimension. So there's another me in another universe who's still living in the village and another Granddad who's still alive. It sounds like science fiction but there are researchers who say it's true. In physics they look at particles and they say

that the particles disappear and go into another dimension and then come back again, presumably because they didn't like it there. And they say this proves that these other universes exist. But it's a bit different isn't it, a tiny particle of light or a human being? I mean, maybe the researchers just blinked a bit and missed the particle. Maybe it didn't go anywhere after all. It could have got fed up with being watched and hidden somewhere. Particles of light are funny like that, just like cats. Uncle Tom used to hide when it was time to go out at night. Maybe the particles of light that the researchers were watching were actually cats in the other world. Maybe the research physicists were students who'd done a few too many drugs and they were hallucinating.

I read on the internet that people with sleep deprivation get hallucinations. You need to dream. People who can't dream get hallucinations because the brain is still dreaming even if you're awake. The hallucination is the dream. What would my hallucination be? Would I even know if I was hallucinating? Maybe this flat is my hallucination. Maybe this life is my hallucination. Maybe my Granddad is still alive and we still live in the old house in the village and I'll wake up and I've been dreaming all along. Yeah right.

I sometimes dream about Debbie. If she knew the dreams I've had about her then she probably wouldn't be my friend. I wonder if she'd have said that about my Granddad. I wonder if she'd have said that if she knew. Would she have said it differently? Would she have said, 'You're disgusting, just like your Granddad.'

Stop it! Stop thinking about it. Eyes shut tight I can't think about it. If I think about it then it's going to happen and I don't want it to happen. I don't want it and if I don't want it then I'm not like that. Isn't it right that it's a choice? That you don't have to be like that if you don't want to be? Debbie was lying anyway. She said her Gran told her but her Gran was lying. How does her Gran know anything about my Granddad

and anyway if Granddad was like that I'd have known wouldn't I? Wouldn't I?

I have to block it. I have to study. I study history, theology, Latin. Good strong solid subjects. I study philosophy, psychology, biology. My Granddad would be proud. My Granddad would laugh and he would be proud and he'd hug me and tell me I'm a good girl. I would tell him all the things I've learned and I'd show him my certificates and my prizes and he'd be happy and proud.

I turn over. I'm hot. Uncle Tom sways like he's on a boat and he opens one eye but doesn't look up. I push the duvet off and lie naked. The corner of it hits Uncle Tom's ear and he flicks it but doesn't look up. I lie in the cool and I lie naked. I feel good. I feel so good. I feel cool. I feel like I'm floating. I feel brushed like something touched me. I can't see anyone but someone touched me. I can't do it. No I can't. I can't do it. I feel vulnerable. I feel exposed. I pull a sheet. Just a sheet. Now I'm wrapped up in a toga like a Roman. Like an angel. A guardian angel. I'm flying but the sheet slips. It's slipping slipping and the people below can see. I sit up. I'm shivering. I'm hot but I'm shivering. I pull the duvet and my pillow back. I bury myself inside. I'm hot but I'm scared and I'm buried inside.

Something touched me. Someone touched me. I felt it. It wasn't a dream. I was awake. I felt it. It wasn't Uncle Tom. He's still on the bottom of the bed. Someone touched me. Was it Granddad? Was he here because I was thinking about him? Did he come back? Was he here? I'm buried inside. If it was Granddad then I would smell his soap. I would smell his tobacco. If it was Granddad then he'd be there, then he'd be standing by my bed. If it was Granddad then I'd just need to put my head out and then I'd see him.

Should I put my head out? What if he's there? What if he's not there? I'm hot and I need to put my head out. I don't know if I can. I can't breathe under here but I can't put my head out.

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What if I died under here? What if I suffocated? Would anyone notice? Would Mum get up without me? Would she find me before it was school time? Would it matter? What does school matter if you're dead? Would Debbie miss me? Would she ever think about me?

I'm hot. I have to put my head out. If I put my head out but don't open my eyes then I won't see whether Granddad is there or not. If I put my head out and just sniff the air then I'd know whether Granddad is there because I'd smell his scent. I'd smell his soap, his tobacco. If I put my head out I can breathe but nothing can get me if I don't open my eyes.

I'll do it. I'll put my head out. But I have to count. I'll count to three then I'll put my head out. I'll count to three. I'll do it. One, two, but what if Granddad touches me again? It's too hot. I have to get out of here for some air. One, two, I can do it. I know I can do it.

One, two, three, out! Breathe. Eyes tight shut. Under again, buried again, inside again in safe inside safe. Safe again. He wasn't there. I know he wasn't there because if he'd have been there I'd have known. I'd have sensed him if he was there, even though I was only out for one breath I'd have known.

But I'm not going to be able to sleep like this. I'm safe buried here in the duvet but I'm not going to sleep. I have to uncurl. My muscles snapped tight need to relax before I can sleep. I have to unfurl. Slowly I make my feet move downwards. Slowly I move my knees away from my chest. But I can't stretch right out. I can't put my feet to the bottom of the bed. The sheet is cooler there and it's nice but I can't put my feet to the bottom. When I was little I used to imagine monsters under the bed. They would grab at my feet if my feet were close to the bottom. They would put their hands over the sides of the bed and grab me. I would have to curl tight right in the middle of the mattress not close to any edge. If I was close to the edge then they would grab me, they would get me.

I'm not little now. I tell myself I'm not little and it's silly to think that. But at 05:19 in the morning when it's still dark and there's no one else around not even a dead Granddad guardian angel it's difficult to stretch your feet out to the bottom of the bed in case there are monsters.

Hush little baby don't say a word. I'm not little I'm fifteen. I'm a fifteen year old insomniac. I push the duvet off my head. It's not dark anymore anyway. It's getting light now. Grey light like an old black and white film about the war that Granddad used to watch. I breathe in the cool air. I lie on my back. And if that mocking bird won't sing, Granddad's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

I lie on my back. I smooth the duvet down. It's crinkly uncomfortable. I smooth it down on the top and then I put my hands under the duvet and smooth down the underside of the duvet. It's all smooth that's better. I put my hands under the duvet. I smooth down my ribs and they tingle. I smooth down my legs. I smooth down over my stomach. I think about Debbie. I shift my legs. The duvet moves. It moves against my body. I think about Debbie. Stop! I have to stop. I'm on a bed of nails. I'm hot and cold I have to stop. I can't do that I can't do it.

My pillow is hot. Turn it over. Turn it over again. Turn it over. Turnitover. Punch it pound it ugly fat stinking pillow punch it punchit. Stop snoring stopit stopit.

Uncle Tom Cobbly gets up and walks up the bed to me. He stands and looks at my face. He is so close that his whiskers almost touch me. He looks at me. I want to say I'm sorry. I want to stroke him and cuddle him but I can't. He turns his back on me and jumps off the bed, his feet pushing into the mattress and making me rock. Uncle Tom wanted to stay with Granddad in Granddad's house in the village. He is Granddad's cat and he didn't want to come with us to the city. He is bad tempered and old and sometimes I think he smells bad like pee.

He jumps up on my windowsill and checks outside. There aren't any birds out yet, Uncle. It's too early. He looks back at me. His eyes say, 'The early cat catches the bird.' He settles down on the edge of the windowsill, his tail falling over the edge. He purrs and his head drops forward rhythmically with each purr until his nose is touching his paws in front of him.

I have a map of my life like an old explorer's map. My life mapped out logically, drawn diagrammatically on parchment crumbling at the edges. Like Christopher Columbus with the known world and a vast area of unknown. Like an old explorer who might find Atlantis or the Garden of Eden. Like it might still be there it's all new, it's all unknown. A vast area with ripples for the sea and 'here be monsters'. My life.

He wasn't a monster. He couldn't have been. My Granddad was a lovely man. He loved me and he was lovely. He couldn't have been a monster. I don't believe it. Debbie was lying and her Gran was lying. It's totally not possible. If he was like that then he'd have tried it with me wouldn't he? Wouldn't he?

Mum never liked him. She didn't like me being with him. She was jealous. That was the only reason. She didn't like us being close because she was jealous of him. He wouldn't hurt anyone. He would never hurt anyone. My Granddad was special and he wouldn't hurt me or anyone else. What does Debbie's Gran know about my Granddad? What does Debbie's Gran know about anything anyway? She was probably just trying to wind me up. Would she wind me up about that? Isn't that a horrible thing to do, to tell someone their Granddad was a dirty old man and liked to touch children up? What did she expect me to do, laugh it off? Why can't a girl be close to her Granddad without people thinking it's suspicious? Why can't I love him, why is that unnatural?

I look at the clock. 05:23. If I go to sleep now I've got like two hours and a bit till the alarm goes off. Who am I kidding? I'm never going to get to sleep. Not while there's monsters

under my bed and Debbie in my head.

I read on the internet that it's genetic. That some people think it's biology which means basically that I could inherit it from my Granddad. But that doesn't make sense to me. How would I inherit it from him? If it's boys that he preferred, if Debbie is telling the truth and not making it up, then how could I inherit that and yet prefer girls? I don't see how that can be. It doesn't make sense.

Was that a bird tweeting then? Was that a bloody bird? Oh for god's sake. Now I'm never going to sleep. If that's the dawn bloody chorus then I'll never get to sleep. You wouldn't think there'd be birds in the city, would you? But oh yes there are. Not as many varieties as we saw in the village, but it's like the noisiest ones come here to roost. Maybe the quieter ones are driven out by all the racket of the traffic. I don't know but whatever it is, there's still a whole load of pigeons, sparrows and house martins chirruping away up there and if I had a pellet gun I'd pop the lot of them.

Uncle Tom gets up and stares out of the window again. He scrabbles at the glass, making squeaky noises. He does that all the time. Mum says she'll give him a cloth and he can clean the windows. I pick up my slipper from the side of the bed and throw it at him. He scoots off under my desk and sits there glowering at me. Those bloody birds.

Why did we have to get the top flat anyway right under the roof? I know why, because she decided we needed to move quickly and she took the first one offered. Like we didn't have the money to hang around in Granddad's house. We could have done but she didn't want to. Why was she in such a hurry? What did she think would happen if we'd stayed?

Close my eyes. Tight shut tight. Seeing red on the inside of my eyelids. Seeing red. I throw my pillow at the wall. Stop snoring, stop bloody snoring! I'm so angry. I'm angry angry angry. I'm angry with Debbie for saying that and for saying it in front of Mum and for making a joke out of it. I'm angry

5am

with Mum for being angry with Debbie. I'm angry with Granddad for dying and leaving me alone. I'm angry with myself for being angry.

What is there left for me? How can I sleep? How can I stop this deluge every night? I need to zap my brain, stick electrodes in there and fry it all out. Take scissors to the antique map, cut out 'here be monsters'. Cut it all out. Like that's going to do any good because I know that it's going to fester and moulder and smoulder and grow back and take over the rest of me like disease. I should just kill myself right now before it gets any worse. If I did, would anyone bother? Would anyone miss me, really?

I don't think that Debbie would. I think she knows. I think she suspects something and that's why she said that. That's why she made that joke because she wanted to see how I'd react. Talking about my Granddad like that. She must have known that I'd be upset. She must have known I'd be angry. Even if she didn't realise that Mum would overhear she should have pretended it was a mistake instead of turning it into a joke. How did she think that Mum was going to react? God this is just impossible. I may as well get up and read. There's no point trying to sleep. But I've got to sleep. I've got to get at least some sleep. What time is it now? 05.31 still could get two hours before the alarm goes off. Nearly two hours. Just need to calm down and think about nothing.

And if that diamond ring turns brass, Granddad's gonna buy you a looking glass. I never knew what happened to the ring. Mum said it turned out to be fake but why did it disappear? You'd keep it even if it were only sentimental value. I totally think she sold it. I remember him showing it to me, opening the tiny velvet box and the diamond glinting in the sunlight like on a film or something. 'Your Grandma's ring.' And he told me one day it would be mine. Well it's gone now. Like everything else. Gone.

I loved the village. I loved playing in the park. I loved

going to the shop for sweets. I loved it when I was little. It got a bit boring more recently because there's nothing to do. Hanging around with the others isn't my thing. But I loved it growing up. We went to the park and played and walked through the park to the shops. As long as I was with other children Mum didn't mind because I didn't have to cross any roads. She didn't have to come with me like she came with me to other shops.

And if I stayed out playing too long, Granddad would come and get me. He always knew where to find me, even if I was hiding he'd find me. That was before the stroke and before he stopped being able to walk. Then we couldn't go through the park any more. Some kids said there was a man in the park. A dirty old man who showed them his bits. I never saw him. I wished I had. Debbie and me used to laugh about it. That strange mixture of fear and excitement that made you think you wanted to see it but also that you didn't want to see it. And if I'd seen it would I have laughed or would I have run away?

Maybe that's what Debbie meant about Granddad – that he was that man? Maybe I got the wrong end of the stick and I'd only thought she meant something else because I was thinking about me. And thinking about me and her. Like I think about me and her a lot. Well what am I supposed to think about while I'm lying here awake? I could think about Latin. *Amo amas amat*. I love you love she loves. Then I think about Debbie again.

God god god! Why can't I bloody sleep? Where's my pillow? I need my pillow. It's on the floor again. How did it get there? Pick up the pillow. Put it on the bed. Put myself on the bed. Put myself on the pillow. Sleep. You'd think it would be that simple. It's the only thing I can't force myself to do. I can force myself to eat when I feel sick. I can force myself to be quiet when I want to scream. I can force myself to walk away when I want to get close. I can force myself to smile

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when I want to attack. What is it that I want to do, that I need to do? What is it that stops me from sleeping? Maybe if I knew what it was that I wanted to do then I'd be able to block it like I block everything else. I'd sleep knowing what it was, blocking it like I block everything else.

I know it's got something to do with Debbie or I wouldn't keep thinking about her. I know. I know, I know what it is. I'm not stupid. I'm not a baby. I know all about sex and everything. But I don't understand how it is Debbie, bloody Debbie that I'm focusing on after all that's happened. What is my brain doing to me? I don't want to think about bloody Debbie. If I have to think about anyone in that way why can't I think about someone I don't have to see every day? Some famous pop star like Pink or someone. I can think Pink all I like and I don't have to talk to her and get embarrassed when I'm around her.

Uncle Tom Cobbly comes out from under the desk. He sneaks up to the side of the bed, thinking that I won't notice him, and sits there contemplating what to do next. Then he makes the decision and jumps up on me, coming forward and purring. Rubbing up against me and pricking the duvet with his claws again. His fur is in my face and his claws scrape my arm. He's being loving but he's hurting me. I stroke him and he rolls over in ecstasy. I tickle his belly. He bites my hand. Then he rubs against me. Mixed messages all the time from the grumpy old git. He gets up and nose-dives against my hand. Okay, that's enough, settle down now Uncle Tom. We both need to sleep. Get your paws off me, Uncle, you're hurting. Get off, I don't want it.

Uncle Tom Cobbly didn't want to leave the village any more than I did. He was happy chasing rats and hiding under hedges. Now he can't go out at all. He's stuck. It wouldn't have been quite so bad moving here if I was going to a new school. But mother dear in her wisdom decided that I should stay in the same school to do my GCSEs rather than switching

schools so I still have to go back to the village kids every day. And they think I'm up myself because I've moved and they want to live in the city and they think it's cool but it bloody isn't because I can't go anywhere or do anything and I have to eat my breakfast on the bus and it's crap. So the irony is that I have all this resentment directed at me for no reason. I'd gladly swap with any of them if it meant I'd sleep.

Just let me sleep. I'll do anything if you just let me sleep. I'll be good I promise. I won't think about Debbie or any other girl. I won't think about anything like that. If I don't think about it then it can't happen. If I don't think about it then I'm not like that.

Granddad, if you can hear me, just remember that I never believed her. I never believed what she said for one minute. I wish you were here so you could tell me that it's all rubbish but I think it's rubbish anyway. I don't believe it at all. Not at all. Granddad, if you're here then please let me smell your soap, your tobacco, so I know you're here. Do something Granddad, make something happen so I know you're here. Make something fall or knock or do something like they do on the TV on the haunted shows. Make a light in the corner or a breeze or make it go colder. Granddad if you can hear me make something happen.

The silence is mocking me. A mocking bird. And if that mocking bird don't sing. What does a mocking bird sound like? Is it a twittering or more like a 'coo coo'? It's supposed to sound like a laugh isn't it? That's why it's called mocking bird. Mock me, mocking bird. Mock me like everyone else laughs at me so you may as well laugh too mocking bird. Were you laughing at me Granddad? Were you laughing at me all this time? No, I don't believe it. I don't believe it at all.

05:33 it's still only 05:33. That's impossible. It was ages ago that I looked at the clock and it was 05:31. What's going on? Have I fallen into a time warp? I wish I could. I wish I could stop time for a week or more and get all the sleep I need

and then start it again and be bright and awake and ready for school. But what if I stopped time and then I couldn't sleep? Wouldn't that be ironic! The night would be even longer then, it would be everlasting. Is that what it's like when you're dead? Is that what it's like for you, Granddad? Is it like being asleep forever or is it like having everlasting insomnia? What do you dream? Would you hallucinate? Or is hallucinating a connection to another universe? Maybe that's it. Maybe I could hallucinate Granddad if I tried hard enough.

Do you dream, Granddad? Wherever you are, do you get dreams? Do you dream about me? If I could dream about you and you could dream about me then would that mean that we could meet up? Would we talk like we used to, would you tell me stories and sing to me? And if that looking glass gets broke. I'm sorry I broke the mirror. I know that's what did it because you get seven years' bad luck. When you had your stroke I knew it was because of the mirror and it was my fault. I was only eight and I couldn't bear to think of seven years of bad luck. I couldn't imagine then what it would be like to be fifteen. I still don't know. I am fifteen and I can't imagine what it's like. It's not any different to anything else. It's just me. So is my bad luck over with now? I don't think so. I don't think it can be. I'm in the worst place ever with no friends and no place to go and no sleep.

I don't remember exactly what happened before the mirror broke. I remember seeing the shards of glass and feeling very frightened and your angry face reflected in each one. I knew it was your mirror and in some way special and that it was my fault you were angry. It was the first time you'd been angry with me ever in my whole life. You'd always been so loving and so kind. And then I broke the mirror. It was like I'd broken the spell. Like your kind face was the reflection and really underneath it was your angry face and when the mirror broke that was all that was left. But then your angry face left when Mum swept up the pieces of the mirror. Your angry face

went in the bin and all that was left was an empty face. I didn't understand what was happening.

When you fell I thought you'd died. I was only eight. I didn't understand about ischemia and other related cardiovascular stuff. I do now. I know what happened to you in intricate detail because I've studied studied studied. I knew instinctively then that it was me that had done it. My breaking the mirror had caused the bad luck which started with your arm and leg not working and kept on going from there. Now I realise that it was caused by stress and your pipe and perhaps genetics, but if it was stress then that would have been the mirror breaking, wouldn't it, if it was a shock? So it was me after all.

I've tried and tried to remember what happened before the mirror broke and I just can't. I get as far as that I was walking upstairs. I was coming to tell you that dinner was nearly ready. Then there's nothing. There's like this big black gap between walking up the stairs and looking at the broken mirror on the floor of the bathroom.

And if that looking glass gets broke, Granddad's gonna buy you a billy goat. I don't understand the thing about the goat, who wants a goat as a present? Maybe it's just an old fashioned song. Or maybe the person who wrote the song couldn't think of anything to rhyme with 'broke'. Can't have been very clever. I could think of loads of things. Poke, bloke, stroke, okeydoke. Well, okay, maybe they are not the sort of things you could get as a present but even so there must be more things to rhyme, not just goat. I mean what sort of present is it? Goats are smelly and noisy and they butt you and kick you. Almost as bad as cats pricking you with their needle claws.

05:40. That went quick! See, it makes no sense to me at all. I can be thinking of something that seems like totally for ages and only a minute has gone by and then another time I'll blink and it's already ten minutes later. What's going on? Am I

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having blackouts? Am I in a multiple personality and the other me is getting up and doing crazy things while the me that's here thinks she's lying awake? That would be quite cool actually. I could go around trashing the flat and drive Mum's car and all sorts of things and all the time I'd think that I was lying in bed staring at the LED light on my clock. 05:41. Multiple me, I could totally go for that. That's one way to make a friend, isn't it? Hello me, how are you doing? I'm doing fine, how are you? Not so bad. Wish I could sleep though. Know what you mean, me too. Well you are me. Imagine if you fell out with yourself, though, and you weren't best friends any more. Nightmare!

And if that billy goat runs away. You can't run away from yourself. That's something in one of those self-help books mother dear reads. She really truly believes that if she reads all this twaddle as Granddad used to call it, then it'll somehow make her life better. But it doesn't. Self-help means helping yourself, not sitting around moaning and groaning about poor ickle me my life is so bloody hard. You have to actually do something about your life as well. You have to actually get up and do something. The first thing to do would be to get out of bed yourself in the morning and not expect your daughter to run around after you like a slave. The second thing to do would be to bloody stop snoring.

Men are from Mars, women are from the darkest reaches of hell. Women who run with the bananas. Women off their trolleys. Chicken soup for vegetarians. One minute psychotic breakdown. Twelve steps to achieving putting your socks on. It's unbelievable the sort of crap that gets banded around in these books. And she swallows it all like it's gospel, churns it up and spits it back out. She could probably write her own self-help book full of sicked-up mush that's the same old psychobabble again and again. It's as if nobody actually notices that they whip out the same thing with a different package. If the self-help books worked then they wouldn't be

needed, would they? If everyone helped themselves and sorted themselves out then the self-help books would work too well and would put themselves out of business. Has nobody actually thought of that at all, anywhere in the last several generations, or were their brains too fried in the seventies on drugs to have any brain cells left?

Breathe. Calm. I have to stop getting worked up over stuff or I'm never going to sleep. Problem is there's too much stuff. Too much to get angry about. What am I supposed to do? I can't ignore it. I can't wallow in it but I can't put it right. I'm stuck. I tell myself it won't be forever but it bloody feels like it. On nights like this when I lie awake all night, every hour feels like forever.

I've thought about running away, don't think I haven't. But what would I do? I'm intelligent enough to know what happens to fifteen year old girl runaways, however intelligent they are. And I'm not having any of that. I have a plan. I made the plan with Granddad, even though he couldn't talk I knew he agreed. I'm going to study study study and I'm going to get out. And once I'm out I'm never coming back. Mother dear can roll around in bed as much as she likes. She can snore to her heart's content and it won't matter to me because I won't be here. I'll be long gone. Long, long gone. I'll be the billy goat. Little billy goat gruff, me. And if that billy goat runs away, Granddad's gonna buy you a brand new day.

I wish you could give me a new day, Granddad. Just one day with you how it used to be. I'll go to sleep now (I'll get one hour and forty-five minutes till the alarm goes off) and when I wake up I'll be at home and you'll be there just like you used to be, making breakfast and whistling. You'll say, 'Good morning, trouble,' and kiss the top of my head. Except I might be taller than you now. Anyway, you'll give me my breakfast and we'll talk about the birds in the garden and you'll get your pipe out and you'll walk me to school through the park and we'll go to our special places that no one else

knows about. You'll let me play on the swings and you'll give me a sweet and say, 'Don't tell Mummy.'

There was one place I really didn't like. It was where the old concrete drainpipe was and it was dingy and smelled of cats' pee. I remember it scared me because it was dark and I ran away from there one time. But you called me a scaredy puss and dared me to go to the other side of the pipe. You said if there were monsters then you'd save me. My guardian angel. But there were no monsters, only you.

It didn't happen. I know it didn't. I'm misinterpreting my memories because of what Debbie said. I was always safe with you. You know I would never believe any of that about you, Granddad. I wish you could just give me a sign that you're here. Make a noise or make something move. Just so I know you're still here being my guardian angel. Has my seven years' bad luck finished yet? Can you come back now? If you did, what would you be like? Back to yourself how you were before the stroke? Strong and standing upright and smelling of soap and tobacco instead of porridge and pee? Smiling and whistling and giving other people the hard stare but never me? Telling me I'm your little girl, your angel, your special precious one? Or will you be stuck in the chair, empty and confused, shouting and mumbling? I think I'd rather you didn't come back if that's what it would be like.

But just one day with you like it used to be. That's not too much of a miracle to ask for, is it? A brand new day. It's already a new day. It's 05:50 and the light is finding its way through my curtains. The light doesn't want to wake up yet but it's inevitable, it has no choice. The particles can't hide here: they have to move ever forward, creeping through my curtains towards the bed. Landing on Uncle Tom's fur and making it shine. The city light is no different to the village light. It's the same sun. And wherever you are, Granddad, it must be the same sun too. Or maybe not. Maybe it's the sun in the other universe where the other Granddad is still alive

and the other me is happy and sleeping all night and waking up without the alarm and walking to school.

But a brand new day for me would be exploding myself into particles of light and streaking across the dimension into that other universe so that I could become that happy person again. I would wake up and Granddad would be there with his pipe and his cup of tea, frying his bacon and whistling. I don't care what anyone says about you, you're my Granddad and I want to be with you. If I go to sleep now I'll get one hour and thirty nine minutes sleep and when the alarm goes off I'll be back in my bed in Granddad's house in the village and we'll get up and have breakfast and walk to school. If I fall asleep now I'll transform into the other dimension. If I concentrate hard enough I can do it. Granddad I know you're listening. You can make it happen. You and me together, we can do anything. Remember you said that to me, 'You can do anything you want. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't.' You said that, remember? We can do it if we concentrate together. I'll go to sleep now and I'll dream of you and then when I wake up we'll be together.

I just need to go to sleep to do it. That's all. Just go to sleep and when I wake up everything will be back to normal again. No stinking city, no snoring mother, no stupid rumours about you or about me. The sun will be shining and we'll go to the park and we'll find our special places and it will be just us. Like it always was.

Don't think about anything else, just being together. Me and you. That's all. Just us, together how it used to be. Float. Drift on the light particles. In and out of dimensions. Through the space time continuum. Floating, floating.

Uncle Tom Cobbly is warm against my belly. He's fully asleep now, he's stopped purring. Mum has stopped snoring. I'm floating, I'm floating.

If I fall asleep now then it will all work out. It's 05:55. I'll get one hour and thirty five minutes before the alarm goes off.

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One hour and thirty five minutes will be enough time to explode and change dimensions and replode. Or implode. Or whatever it would be. I can do it if I go to sleep now. I need to go to sleep. If I fall asleep now I'll get one hour and thirty four minutes.

Float.

If I fall asleep now I'll get one hour and thirty three minutes.

If I fall asleep now.

If I fall asleep.

If I fall.

If. If. Ffffffffffffffff.