

Sinister
Season

A Collection of Short
Strange Tales

SARAH MASTERS

SINISTER SEASON

A Collection of Short, Strange Tales

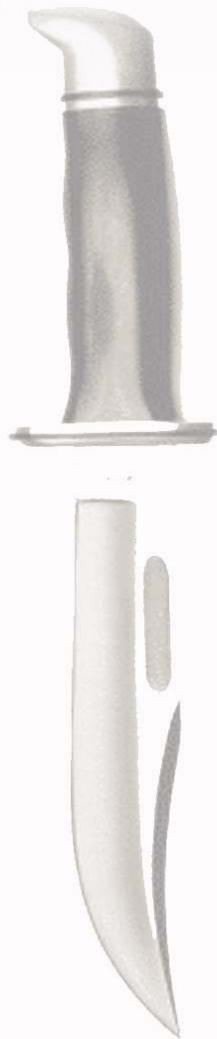
© Sarah Masters

Cover Art and PDF © Delicious Designs

Sarah Masters has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work. This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. This publication may be passed on electronically as a free e-book. All rights reserved.

Sinister

Season



Age

I hate them.

“Let’s build a pond,” he probably said.

“What a jolly good idea!” she probably said.

“We’ll fill it with pretty fish,” she probably said.

And they built it, filled it with fish.

And frogs. Frogs that creep under the fence into my garden. Frogs my cat decides are great gifts. Frogs she brings in through the cat flap to show me. And dragonflies. Cat catches them; their wings flap, buzz like a fucking bee.

Yeah, they built a pond all right.

* * *

“Hello, Lucy! How are you?” she calls from her front garden.

I’ve left my house to walk to the local shop. You know, get a loaf of bread, some milk. She’s out doing her bloody gardening. Wearing pink suede gloves, I ask you. Who she thinks she looks like, I’ll never know.

I stop by her white painted gate, stare at her blue-rinsed hair, gratified mine is a soft, silky grey. “Oh, I’m fine thanks, Freda. How are you?”

She stands, smile fixed, white teeth almost sparkling in the sunlight. Dentures. “Oh, not too bad. Can’t complain!”

And then she proceeds to do just that.

Her words drift; my attention wavers. She’s talking about the algae in her pond, how it rests on the water similar to an oil slick. Images of me dunking her wide head under that water, the muck clinging to her hair, fills my mind. I’d like to drown the bitch.

“So you see, Arthur thinks buying some Pond Scum Scram will help, but honestly, we’ve used something like that before. Perhaps the filter’s blocked?”

I wouldn’t know anything about filters. Not that kind anyway—which reminds me, I must buy some for my roll ups. Got half a pouch of baccy still, so that’s okay.

“I have no idea,” I say and smile—a smile that hurts my cheeks.

She places her suede-covered hands on her hips, hips that need liposuction. “Aw, well, we can always ask the man at the aquarium centre. He’ll know what to do.”

Yeah. While you’re at it, ask him about pond covers so your ugly frogs don’t get out. Ask him why ponds attract those big ol’ scary dragonflies. Bastard things.

“That’s a good idea,” I say and adjust my bag on my arm, nestle the handle in the crook. Damn pissed off the way it slips down to my wrist all the time.

“Off to the shop, are you?” she asks.

“Yes. Do you need anything?”

Like a packet of arsenic to go with your tea?

“No. Thanks for asking. We’ll take a walk up there later. Arthur likes a little walk in the afternoon.”

I’m glad she said that. I expected her to say something entirely different. Something that would make me want to gag. Arthur must surely have a wrinkly dick. Perhaps the wrinkles stretch when he gets an erection. Maybe a willy is the only thing that remains young-looking on a body, you know, when the man gets excited like that. Bile rises, burns the back of my throat. Why did I allow myself to entertain that thought?

“Right, well,” I say and clear my throat, wince. “I’d best be off.”

I move away. Arthur stands on their threshold, hands linked across his big belly.

“You been talking to the old bitch, duckie?” he says.

“Shhh, she’ll hear you.”

Yes, she’ll hear you.

* * *

Anger lends me speed, and I make it to the shop within five minutes of the bitch comment. A gang of youths loiter round the shop entrance, hooded tops and saggy-arsed jeans rendering them all the same. They stare at me from beneath scowling brows. Damn teenagers don’t realise they’re born. In my day, they’d have been working on a Saturday morning or helping their mothers. From what I’ve seen of today’s youth, they need a good kick up the jacksie.

I stomp past them and into the shop, hear their laughter, but I don’t care. I’ll shock them one of these days, you’ll see.

I buy what I need, leave the shop, and steam home on legs of ire. Fucking kids and fucking neighbours. Who needs them? Once inside, I put my purchases away and make a quick cuppa. Sitting by the front window, I watch the street, waiting for Freda and Arthur to piss off up the shop. Ooh, there they go. Arm in arm like young lovers. Bloody disgusting, if you ask me. I’d rather be alone than have to put up with Arthur nightly.

I leave the window and hurry out to my back garden. It’s been a while since Father passed on, but I’ve kept all his things, oh yes I have. Despite the gloomy interior of my shed, I have no trouble finding Father’s large net. He used to like fishing, he did. He’d travel for miles in his old blue Ford and set up beside rivers. Bring home a trout or two if he got lucky.

I may be getting on in years, but my agility hasn't deserted me yet. I climb over the wire fence that separates my garden from theirs and hoist the net with me. Ooh, they do have a bit of scum on their little pond, don't they? Reminds me of seaweed. In the net goes, swish-swosh-swish, and a weight fills it. I lift the net, gratified to see a fuck-off big fish, flailing and gasping for air. Skittering over to the fence, I dump the fish onto my grass and watch it for a brief moment. Its tail rises and falls, rises and falls, smacking the ground with a thump. Feisty little bugger. I repeat my last action and empty the pond of its fish life. The frogs can bloody well stay there.

Back over the fence—quick, quick, time's moving on—I hold the net to the ground and kick the four large fish back into it. Two dead, two to go. Inside my kitchen, I balance the net over the sink then rummage in the cupboard beneath. Black bin liner their eternal shroud, in they go, whoop! Tie up the bag, bunny ears, look at them! Bunny ears! And stop flapping, you scaly little bastards.

An hour passes. I've eaten lunch, washed the dishes, peeked out the front window. And she's there, fart arsing about in her flowerbeds, cheeks red, infernal suede gloves back on. An indignation-filled sigh bursts from my mouth, and I bustle into the kitchen and hoist the black bag over my shoulder. Damn heavy, those fish. Big as cod, they are. Out the front door, down to the bottom of my garden where the dustbin sits.

She sniffs. Loudly so I can hear her. I know her bloody game. The fish smack the bottom of the bin with a satisfying *thwump*, and the lid clangs back atop the bin. Cymbals spring to mind. Big brass bands.

Back up the path I go and pause to dead-head some potted flowers.

“Oh, Lucy,” she says and stands from her crouched position.

“Hello again, Freda.”

A sob—and I would have said *escaped* her mouth, but it didn't, she *forced* it out—and she's over here now, standing on the other side of the little wooden fence that separates our front gardens. Eyes red-rimmed, nose glistening with snot that she really should wipe with a hanky.

“Lucy, did you notice anyone hanging around when we went to the shop earlier?” She blinks, and a tear plops down her wrinkly cheek. Bottom lip quivers. Nothing but a wet fish, she is.

I force my lips to remain pouted—mustn't bloody laugh—and say, “Hanging around? No, I didn't, sorry.”

I turn to leave; laughter bubbles up inside me—so strong that it'll bark out any moment.

“Only, someone...someone...stole our pond fish!” She wails much like I did when my cat brought in that dragonfly.

I turn back to face her. “They *never!*” I say. “Atrocious! What *is* the world coming to?”

She lifts a hand to her gaping mouth, stifles a cry, and rushes away through her front door.

I'm in the house, on the sofa, laughing like a girl. Arms and legs pistoning; a fly caught with Raid. Tears falling, chest heaving.

Bitch, indeed.

* * *

Those kids, the ones from the shop, have just walked past my living room window. Little bastards are probably on their way to the shop now. On their way to torment old ladies like me.

I'll give them what for.

I strut into the kitchen and reach into the saucepan cupboard. Behind my black pans sits a box. A box full of goodies. I saved them from last year. Stifling a laugh—I want to save it for later—I don my cardigan,

place my goodie box in my bag, and step out of the house. She's there. You know, Freda, pissing about in her flowerbed again. How many times a week does a plant need pruning, for fuck's sake? Bored, she must be.

"Lovely evening, isn't it, Lucy?"

"It is that, Freda. Garden's looking lovely. Must be all that sun we've been having."

Her face clouds. Inwardly laughing, I stroll down my garden path.

"It isn't just the sun, you know," she calls. "Green fingers have something to do with it!" She laughs, the kind that makes me want to ram her face amid her rose bushes so the thorns cut up her damn podgy face.

"Ah, but without sun, your garden wouldn't flourish, would it?"

She sighs, smile fixed, and turns away to continue fucking about with her flowers. I'd love to come out at midnight while she's servicing her Arthur and chop the buggers down. Arrange them in the vase on my windowsill and snigger every time I caught a whiff of their scent. She'd shout, "Lucy? Did you see anyone hanging about last night? Only...only... someone's stolen all my roses!"

"They *never!*" I'd say, adding that I didn't know what the world was coming to, and run indoors to piss myself on my sofa. As I always do.

I can't be arsed to speak to her anymore, so unlatch my gate and take a fast-paced walk to the shop. I want to catch the little bleeders.... In my day, kids had respect for their elders, and if they didn't they got a clip round the ear hole. I'll give them more than that.

There they are, hoodies on, trainers as white as the proverbial snow. Except snow isn't white anymore, is it? It's grey, mud and filth marring its previous overnight beauty. Fucking environment. And look at them boys now, smoking cigarettes. At their age!

I hustle past them—I have to, else they won't move out of the way—and they *tsk* as if *I'm* the rude one. Inside the shop, I join the queue. A long queue. I keep glancing at the door to make sure the little turds are still there. Unlike the Post Office—and hasn't *that* gone downhill the past few years?—the queue shortens quickly. Pouch of baccy and a bag of sweets in hand, I'll be all set in front of the box tonight. My favourite programme is on.

Outside the shop, the boys form a line across the pavement, hindering my journey. Except I wasn't planning on going anywhere just yet anyway.

“Out the bloody way!” I say and shoulder barge one of the chaps in his puny chest.

“Oi! That's abuse, that is. I could sue you for that!”

“So sue me. In fact, if you want something to sue me for, come round here.” I scuttle round the side of the shop and down an alley. They're following me, as I knew they would. Their laughter sounds assured.

Won't be for much longer.

The back of the shops appears deserted. I turn and find the youths right up my arse. A gaggle of bloody geese, the lot of them.

“Come on then, you old biddy. Give us something to sue you for.”

I present my back to them once more, forage in my bag for the goodie box. Pulling out a treasure, I spin back round and hand it to the kid at the head of the crowd.

“Hold that a minute, son.”

And he does. Prick. Does he not *know* that's a firework?

I fumble in my bag again. My fingers curl around a lighter. Our dad left it to me when he died. One of them Zippo efforts. You know, stays alight longer than the plastic buggers that are on sale these days.

Sinister Season

I lean toward the youth and flick the flame alight, hold it beneath
the goody, and side-step around the crowd.

“D’you know,” I say while scooting past them, “that scowling at
old ladies isn’t a good pastime.”

Discarded Memories

Lots of people say it. “I know everything about her. We’ve told each other all our secrets.” I’ve said it, believed that statement without analysing it. With hindsight, I now know it isn’t possible for one person to know everything about someone else. That the statement is just something we say—a generalisation. I couldn’t possibly have known it all. Hell, there must have been things *she* wasn’t even aware of, things forgotten, taking up space in the dust of her mind among the stacks of files labelled DISCARDED MEMORIES – DO NOT OPEN.

Still, at the time I made that statement, that generalisation, I believed. We’d been seeing one another for months. You know how it goes: meals out, cinema trips, strolls through a park neither of us wanted to walk through but didn’t like to say. You can fit an awful lot of words into that amount of time.

Hailing from a family who didn’t regard her as worthy of their love, she came to me a loner. Originally, she resided in the north of England, where the Newcastle wind blew her delicate skin and chapped it. Where her family snubbed her in the streets for no apparent reason. She moved here, to France, to begin again.

She’s the first person I’d let my guard down with. The one who allowed me to feel so comfortable that I let out a little gas on occasion, picked my nose while sitting beside her instead of excusing myself and going to the bathroom. Funny how, during the first flush of love, we are acutely aware of our actions, their actions, yet later on down the line...

We married. You could say that day became the happiest one I’d ever lived. With only friends present—my family also live in England and

couldn't make the ceremony on such short notice—our wedding was a quiet affair. Something we both enjoyed.

Upon hearing the news of her pregnancy, tears sprung up, dashed down my cheeks in a race to see which one reached my jaw line first. She cried too—exuberantly—and I marvelled at how emotional one woman could be. And the child, when born, rendered her a jibbering wreck. She clutched the infant to her bosom, salty tears wetting the fuzzy down on his head, and muttered something about Jacob. I remember blinking, incomprehension clouding my thought process for scant seconds, before it fled from my mind on liberty's wings.

The baby, the boy, fitted perfectly in our trio, the walks in the park enjoyable then, taking the wee man out for a breath of fresh air. A charming child for the first couple of weeks. People expressed how good he seemed, how quiet. However, as is nature's want, colic seized the boy, its griping hands of menace wringing those small innards, sending the child's previous calm into the ether.

She changed with him. Became surly, churlish, and, one evening, I looked across at her feeding him and sensed something wasn't quite right. But those feelings are fleeting, aren't they? As humans we get them all the time. Instinct, inner voice, call it what you will. I ignored it.

Hell's minions follow me now, chase me on occasion when I refuse to heed their taunts. Heckle me with their spiteful words: *You should have listened, should have watched more closely...*

The child, now beneath the earth, is at peace with the angels. With Jacob, his half-brother. Both passing over at the hands of their mother.

No. You can't possibly know everything about anybody.

Cookies

“Get out of it, you bugger!”

“Get out of what?”

“The cookie jar. Look, your hand’s inside the damn thing.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is. You’re going to eat another cookie, aren’t you?”

And so what if I was? In the grand scheme of things, does it *really* sodding matter? A few more calories. An extra spoonful of sugar to rot my tooth enamel. Aw, come on!

“Get your hand out!”

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

“Maybe you don’t, but you better had.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll chop your bleedin’ hand off at the wrist!”

Like she would. Jesus. Such a drama queen. Just because she counts every bloody calorie, she expects me to. Nag, nag, nag. On and on and on. Cut her tongue out if she keeps on.

“Don’t laugh! It isn’t *funny!*”

“I’m not laughing!”

“Yes you are, and you’ve still got your hand in the jar!”

“I’m not taking it out. I want a biscuit.”

“Take it out.”

“No.”

She can’t half stare a person down. Eyes like a bloody demon, that one. Honestly, I’m going to stand firm. I’m going to eat another cookie. Chocolate chip now. I would’ve had a digestive, slightly less fattening, but she’s pushed me to want the chocolate.

“David.”

“What?”

“You’re going to die if you keep eating those biscuits.”

“So, biscuits are going to kill me, are they? Do they sprout arms? Arms that wield knives? I don’t think so.”

“Oh, don’t be so bloody ridiculous. You know what I mean.”

“Well, say what you mean, then. Why hold back?”

“You’re obese. Overweight. Fat. There, I’ve said it.”

“Yes, you’ve said it.”

I rather liked that knife-wielding biscuit quip. Shame she didn’t find it amusing. I haven’t seen her laugh in ages. Her eyes harbour worry every time she looks at me. Or am I mistaking it for hope? Hope that my thirty-stone arse will keel over and she can claim the life insurance.

“David.”

“What?”

“Please take your hand out of the cookie jar. You don’t need that cookie really, do you?”

“No.”

“No, you don’t need the cookie, or no you won’t take your hand out?”

“Not won’t. Can’t.”

My hand’s stuck, isn’t it? Fucking fat hand’s stuck in the cookie jar. The cookie jar in the shape of a police officer who yells, “Stop! Move away from the cookie jar!” Like the one on *The Office*. She bought it so she’d know what I was doing. Was a time when I could open it just far enough to reach in. Not possible anymore.

“Oh, *David*. You’re worrying me senseless, d’you know that? Here, let me help you.”

“No.”

Sinister Season

“Please?”

“No.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed. Not with me.”

“I’m not.”

Though I am. Of course I am. Used to be quite the svelte man when we married. Abs, biceps, the lot. Kind of let myself go when...well, when Abby left us. I say left.... She died, see. Hard burying your own.

“David.”

“What?”

“Would you like a hug?”

“Please.”

Birds on a Cliff

Like a swarm of bees they circled. Swooped through the sky, black spectres that they were, the portents of what was to come, calling him with their squawks. They dove low, only to lift themselves up on the jet stream, floating before their wings beat the air once more.

Daniel spied her on the cliff top as he climbed the steep path, her long, grey hair billowing to the right. The wind battered her. Wispy as she was, it was a wonder she didn't get knocked over. Daniel didn't want the wind doing what he had set out to do. He picked up speed, his breath coming in short gasps, and topped the cliff. Its flat, green expanse shrunk her, and she looked even more like the lonely figure she had become.

He had given in to her letters. Come to meet her in the place they'd visited when he was a child. The journey here filled his mind with tormenting images, and Daniel saw not the road upon which he travelled, but pictures from the past.

He watched her from behind, took in her slight figure, the shortness of height. Shoulders hunched, though not by choice, her hands thrust into her pockets, she looked out over the cliff at the sea, the surface choppy, angry. After all these years he wasn't prepared for the emotions he would experience upon seeing her again.

A tight knot of apprehension gathered in his gut, and she turned with a gasp at the touch of his hand on her shoulder.

It all came rushing back.

"Daniel. Here."

He went to her, head low, heart ready to burst.

"Yes, Mama."

“Did you take some extra bread today, hmmm? You take just a little slice, think Mama didn’t notice?”

Slight nod, admitting guilt.

The fist cracked his cheekbone.

“You came, Daniel.”

“I did.”

Her skin, like parchment, and with her brown coat, she appeared as a sepia photograph. Her thinning, wind-tumbled hair gave her the air of a Macbeth witch. Hooked nose, warts.

“I wanted to see you before...well, I’m getting old, aren’t I?”

She took her hands out of her pockets, held them out toward Daniel in supplication. Gnarled knuckles—tree roots—brittle nails yellowed with age. Arthritis, he suspected.

He did not grasp her hands. “Well, I’m here. You see me. What do you want?”

Mama smiled, dropped her arms, the teeth she had flashed at him as a child now gone, replaced by replicas. And that smile revolted him. Those eyes, the only thing that remained the same, seared into his mind.

Mama sneered, holding out her painted toenails.

“Daniel. Here.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Blow my toes. Dry the polish.”

Daniel knelt, blew his sweet child breath upon her feet.

The kick broke his nose.

“What I want is forgiveness. Things have been playing on my mind, you know, things I did back then, when I wasn’t well.”

Wasn’t *well*? Daniel bristled, his mouth a tight, set line. Excuses for everything. She always had a reason.

“Maybe I don’t want to forgive. Maybe you hurt me too much for that.”

She opened her mouth to speak again but faltered, unsure of what to say next. She had expected him to accept her apology, then—if it could be called that. Mama thought he still felt as he did back then, would take whatever she dished out. She needed to know her assumptions were wrong.

“Sometimes, Daniel, life deals you a blow. Makes you act out of character for a time—”

“For a time? How long is a time? Days? Weeks? *Years?*”

“Daniel, I...”

Mama sat, hands on her lap, demure.

“Sure, Mr Holding, Daniel here has bruises, but don’t all boys? He’s a clumsy kid, you know? I’ll make sure he does better at school, stops daydreaming, okay?”

Outside in the car park, Mama turned her steely gaze on him.

“Daniel. Here.”

He stepped forward.

“Stand there while I back the car out.”

“Okay, Mama.”

The wheel broke his foot.

Images jostled with one another in his mind; fast-paced scenes flitted in and out of his vision. His breathing quickened, and he fought the panic attack, tried to calm himself by filling his lungs slowly, exhaling through his nose.

Mama backed away one step, seeing the look in his eyes. The ocean meeting the sky behind her rendered the vision of her surreal. Her face showed contempt and a little fear.

“Mama. Here.”

She stood, realisation dawning.

With one finger he pushed her forehead. She stumbled backward, landing close to the cliff edge, panicked, stricken.

“Daniel. Daniel, help me up, you hear me?”

“Sure, I hear you.”

Grasping her brittle-skinned hand churned his stomach. He swallowed bile and waited for her to be upstanding, then paced one step forward, almost nose-to-nose with the one who gave him life. She shuffled back, testing her footing, the grass snuffling, reminding him of...

“Daniel. Watch.”

He opened his eyes, sight bleary as the harsh overhead light blazed. The blanket tucked beneath his chin, only his head showing and his nose numb, Daniel blinked, sight now cleared.

“Watch Mama. You might learn something.”

He saw, his eyes widening as he drank in each new sight. Mama taking tablets with whisky. Mama cavorting around the room, her dress swishing, her disorientated, acting so odd...

“Mama. Watch. Keep your eyes open on the way down. You might learn something. Watch your last moments for Daniel.”

His palm against her chest, one feather-light movement made her sail. She uttered no sound, her mouth an O of shock as she flew down. And the birds, the birds swooped with her, circling, waiting for the final, broken dash against the rocks.

Tears ran down his face, and he turned and made his way down the path, hands in pockets, chin wedged into his scarf. It would be all right now. It would. A deep breath in, a long breath out, he expelled her, ridding his body of its demons. Relief flooded through him, elation embraced him, and he was set free.

Sinister Season

The birds' squawks, so many of them, let Daniel know she had hit the bottom—where he had been all his life. Now the time had come for him to climb to the top.

And he would do too.

Then, "*Daniel. Here.*"

Is This my Lot?

I look around my living room. Battered, blue-striped velour sofa and chairs, an iron burn on one of the chair arms, its singed brown triangle standing out. I'd buy 'sofa savers' to stop the sagging seat cushions if I had the money. I shove the clothes and magazines along the seats when I want to sit down.

Red walls, the paint a donation from a neighbour. Dark blue curtains complete with frilly pelmet—complete with dust in the gathers. I'd get up there and smack the dust off if I could be bothered. I never shut the curtains. I like to see what's going on out there.

Grey fluffy carpet when new, beige brown with dirt and grime, flattened down with age now. Persian rug, another donation, nearly covers the whole carpet. Red with cream patterns, the cream nearly obliterated by cat shit and food the kids have dropped.

A large oak wooden unit fills the long wall. Yet another 'gift' from someone who no longer wanted it. Dust layers its surfaces. The items it houses are grimy and have an oily feel. A breeze lifts the top surface of dirt, and on a summers day I sit and watch the dust motes jostle one another in the air. Knickknacks galore fill the shelf sections: ornaments, DVDs, videos, newspapers, ashtrays.

My friend gave me the fish tank and fish, underwater diving man, and filter. I clean it out from time to time, if the water looks a bit brown or the fish gasp for air at the top. The light blew months ago. Next time I get some spare money I'm going to buy one of those blue fluorescent tubes that make the tank look like it's the sea. Not sure when that will be, though. For now they can have the daylight.

The living room depresses me, so I go out and have a look at my kitchen. I'm trying to look at it as someone else would, without my personal bias. Dirty cups and plates litter the sides, the washing up bowl filled with much of the same. Encrusted pizza, tomato sauce, scrambled egg, and gravy congeal on plates I can't be arsed to wash. Cups are tea-stained, as are the teaspoons. Sugar spilled onto the cooker top some time ago, along with some form of liquid, and it's dried in a hard, sticky mass. Squeezed-out tea bags, gone yellow, dot the spaces in between.

I sigh. It's true what *she* said. I know that, but I don't want to believe it.

Walking out to my hallway, I dare to take a look at my reflection in the mirror (charity shop, circa 1970, one pound fifty) and take a long, hard look at myself.

I've had the same long, frizzy hair-do for years. Resembles that woman from that TV programme, you know, the one whose daughter killed her dad. I kind of look like her too, except she's clean. Broken veins cover my ruddy cheeks, and my eyes *are* spiteful, I can see that now. My teeth. Well, I don't really own anything you could call a tooth. I have broken, blackened stubs. They nestle and cling for all they are worth into red, sore gums. I *am* an unsightly mess. She is right when she says this, I just don't know what to do to get myself out of it.

As for my personality, she said it was as ugly as my house, as ugly as my heart. She said I'm emotionless, cruel to my kids, that I find happiness in other people's downfalls and snigger when things go wrong for everyone. Reckons that all I see when I look at her house and her, is that she is pretty with nice friends and kids, that the inside of her home is beautiful, and that the outside is too fancy with its terracotta pots full of flowers and the neat, clean white front door.

It's just not fair!

She said I don't see the hard work that went into getting her home like that, the long hours in a job that paid peanuts, the years of buying what she could when she could afford it. That because she is considerate to others, that in turn makes people considerate to her. She is liked and respected.

She's right. Again. I know I'm in a rut and I can't seem to get out. My home is a shit hole. My kids are monsters because I let them be so. My appearance is unsightly. If I saw someone that looked like me, I'd be the first to take the piss. If I got off the dole and got a job, maybe I could have a home like hers. How come it took for her to point it out to me, to make me realise? Maybe it's because she's the only person who has told me such things.

All I said when I walked past her in the street was 'Who do you think you are, with your nice clothes and poncy house? All right for some, isn't it?' and she flipped her lid and shouted all those things at me. Said she was sick of hearing my snide comments for the past ten years, that I needed to get a life and stop poking my nose into hers.

Has it really been that long? Have I really been picking at her for a decade? In all that time my house and life has stayed the same, yet hers has moved on. Am I *really* that bitter?

I shrug. I have these little moments every now and again, where I do what the magazines tell me and take a look at my life and my 'inner self'.

It's all a load of crap.

Can't wait until tomorrow. I'll give Miss Hoity Toity up the road something to really have a go about. I'm just off to key the side of her car.

Mine

When me mum comes in from the shops, the smell of bread waggles round the room and up my nose. My tummy hurts cos I'm so hungry, and me mum, she's smiling cos at last we have some food. Some weeks Monday takes an age to come back round.

Dad left us just before the summer came, and Mum had to fill out this form to get some money. This book came in the post, and it's full of money, like cheques, but she can only go and get some every Monday. It doesn't last very long. Mum has to pay lots of it back out again, to the electric and rent man, cos Dad didn't pay them enough.

One day, Mum reckons she'll find a job that will pay enough to let us live proper, so I can have sweets that cost more than twenty-five p. And we can have fish and chips from the chip shop or a Chinese take-away if we're really lucky. Mum could have her fags and chocolate again, and I'd get my pocket money back. When I do I'm going to buy me mum some flowers, cos there's no one here to buy her any except me. She said me dad was the only man for her, and now I'm the only little man she'll ever love.

We eat the bread—that's our treat, half a French stick each—and it's still warm and so soft. I want to scoff it but if I do that it'll be gone in no time and I want it to last. I like pulling out the fluffy middle and then eating the crust. It gives me jaw ache by the time I'm finished, but I don't care once me belly's full and the griping has stopped.

The winter's coming, and Mum's really worried about how cold we're going to be. Already my fingers feel numb on the ends, and me nose, well, sometimes I forget it's even there. Granddad's bringing some logs and coal round for the fire at the weekend, so I reckon a few more days

won't hurt us. I like sitting watching the telly in my sleeping bag anyway. It's really snug, and if I need to go to the toilet, I hop about in it. Like now. Mum, she laughs cos I've fallen over and says it's just like that time when I was five in the sack race on sports day.

She starts to cry, and I don't know what to do. My arms get all caught up in the sleeping bag, and I want to get them out to give her a cuddle, but the zips stuck, so all I can do is put my head on hers, and she cries even more and says I'm a good lad and what would she do without me? She wipes her eyes and hiccoughs like I did when me dad left, and it brings back memories, and I start crying an' all.

For a treat me mum puts on the spare gas fire so we can warm up a little bit, and I wipe me eyes and watch the telly. I don't mind watching all the soap operas cos they make Mum smile sometimes.

When I'm a man, I'm going to give my mum all my money and buy her a house and flowers and everything.

* * *

Looking back, those times were tough, but we got through them without Dad. He never did contact us again after his initial leaving, and we muddled on. Mum did get a job, and as I fondly recall it was in the baking department of the supermarket. At the end of her shifts her boss allowed her to buy bread and doughnuts and such at a cheaper rate. We no longer went hungry.

I did well at school, got the grades, strived to make something of myself, made my mother proud of me.

And now I'm a man. I gave Mum money, bought her a house and flowers and everything. Everything being whatever she needed, wanted. She didn't go without, and I'm determined to make sure things are just as

they should be. Especially as there is a new man in her life, who I am sure is just after her for what she can give him—free board and food.

I didn't like him as soon as she introduced us. Her dear, beaming face begged for me to accept her new partner, silently asked me to let her go, allow her to live her own life. She didn't need me. God forbid she should ask me to move out.

Didn't need me. Hadn't we always been a team? Didn't we always do things together? I know being thirty-four I really should be of an age to accept this change of circumstances with dignity, understand that as a woman, my mother has needs too, but I can't.

And I won't.

His name is Bernard Higgins, and she met him via a friend at work. I could cheerfully strangle that friend; throttling the life from her would give me great pleasure, but I realise that it isn't her who should be removed from the equation.

Bernard of the flowers, the jewellery, the senseless gifts of cuddly bears holding hearts to their bellies proclaiming to love Mum forever. These stuffed toys bring a rosy hue to Mother's cheeks. She dances with them while smelling the roses, her eyes half closed. She looks younger than her years then, and I'm transported back to those times, of the cold house, the baked French sticks, the sleeping bag.

When I came home from school, this man bent over the washing machine, now pulled out from under the worktop. I inched closer. He held a spanner and wiggled it around a nut or something.

Me mum, she came in then, from the garden, where she'd been in the shed I reckon, cos she held this wrench, one that me dad must have left behind. She handed it to me to pass to the man, and I did. He took it

with a false smile, the kind that teachers give the naughty kids at school when they want to shout at them but don't.

“This is the washing machine repairman. Say hello to him, Connor.”

I didn't want to say hello to him. I didn't want him to be here. He needed to be gone, but I didn't know how I was going to get him out. I wasn't big enough, being only twelve. I did smile, though, and he smiled back.

“You look a nice strong lad, Connor. Fancy helping me, eh?”

I didn't want to help, especially cos me mum's face was happy, her cheeks red, and she kept smiling in a really silly way. Girls do at school if Tom Whittle gives them one of his sexy looks.

I smiled at him again.

“Your mum's going to come with me to the pub tonight, Connor. You alright with that, son?”

I wasn't his son. He wasn't me dad. And me mum, she wasn't going anywhere tonight except in that living room, watching telly with me.

The repairman, he went back to using the wrench after I didn't answer him, and me mum stared at me, kind of pleading with her eyes, asking me to let her go, rubbing her fingers against each other. I didn't want to let her go, she was mine. We stuck together we did, wasn't anyone going to pull us apart.

“Whoa, quick! Hold this, son!”

The repairman, water gushing on the floor from the water pipe, struggled to stop the flow. Mum, she ran to get some towels to throw on the floor to stop the water spreading from the lino in the kitchen to the carpet in the dining area.

Sinister Season

The wrench, heavy in my hands, made a good sound when I whacked it on his head. Didn't kill him. Hurt him some, though, and once he'd fixed the machine, he didn't come back to pick me mum up.

We watched telly that night, me in my sleeping bag on the chair, me mum on the sofa with a soggy tissue.

We are watching telly tonight, me in the chair with my celebratory brandy, mother on the sofa with a cup of tea, a soggy tissue, and one of those infernal Bernard bears.

A wrench did not do the trick this time. Nor did a hammer. But a quick flick of my penknife against his wobbly jowls, and he got the message.

His telephone call to mother was apologetic, but he felt he wasn't quite ready for such an intense relationship, that he had given himself too freely, too quickly, so soon after his recent divorce. Mother understood, of course she did.

As had Bernard.

Good man.