

Padua Road

At one-thirty in the morning, Kate's overwrought brain would not be still. Turning on to her back, she scrutinised her bedroom. The glare of the street light outside cast orange bars of light through the thin curtains. It was silent and cold, the heating was off and the sheets in the large bed were chilly.

Kate succumbed to the flow of thoughts and memories. Now that she had taken up her new existence, her old one seemed reluctant to let her go. Unlike her ex-husband. He already had a new woman, a 'friend' had told her. So now someone else had her life.

It was three months since Kate had moved house, into a between-the-wars semi at the end of Padua Road. An honest and solid house, it wasn't what she was used to, but it had plenty of space and a room for Celia when she wasn't at college. Over Christmas Celia had pronounced it suitable, so Padua Road had passed the first test and Celia had a place to come home to, whenever she needed one.

Providing a home was important to Kate. Since the separation, she had recalled, more often than she had for many years, the days before her marriage. Her memories of life in her father's house, her own first home, grew sharper as time passed, although her father was long dead and her sister long gone.

Kate's sister was a successful actress, whose face stared out from magazine stands and television screens. Bianca, the younger, prettier sibling, had always hogged the limelight. Kate remembered, with familiar bitterness their father's indulgent pride when her sister had so many admirers, however badly she'd behaved to them. Their father was smitten by her sister as he had never been by Kate and both sisters knew it.

So Kate became the clever one and had gone to university, although her father grumbled and Bianca giggled behind her hand. Kate flushed as she pictured her younger self flying out at both of them in a rage. But she went up to college and there she met Pete, the man who was now her ex-husband.

Her glamorous sister hadn't yet visited Padua Road, though she had promised to do so. She would be an exotic in this suburban neighbourhood of young families and retirees. Next door, Mrs Shah was big-eyed and quiet, but

she always smiled and nodded when pegging out her family's washing. Mr Shah, somewhat older, was neat and always polite. Assuming them happy, Kate had been shocked one day to hear raised voices. Harsh words were spoken in a different tongue followed by the sound of sobbing.

Asha, the school-girl daughter, had pegged out the washing the next day, though later Kate had seen Mrs Shah going shopping with her mother-in-law, apparently at ease. Couples quarrelled. At least, she told herself, her ex hadn't been physically violent. Then she remembered his more sophisticated cruelties. She pushed the memories away.

Kate shut her eyes, but sensed tears coming. No. She had had enough of weeping.

She felt a sudden weight on the foot of the bed and heard a satisfied purr.

So, a cat had got in, probably when she was putting the rubbish out. Lured by the prospect of food and warmth or love and affection. It would be unlucky then.

She relented and lifted her arm out from beneath the duvet. The pulsing rumble deepened and the weight shifted. As she opened her eyes the orange bars of light seemed softened by the approaching dawn.

She snatched back her hand, her body rigid.

Kate ceased to breathe.

There was no cat on the duvet, just the spiralling pattern.

The vibration continued and the invisible creature stretched against Kate's legs. She drew the duvet up to her chin, afraid to move. What was happening? Was she going mad?

A parody of girlish modesty, Kate stared at the foot of the bed, at the blocks of orange light and black shadow, her eyes wide.

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Kate forced her eyelids apart. Corners were indistinct in the mouse-grey morning light. Tentative movement of her feet reassured her that there was nothing lying on the bed. Had there ever been? How could there have been? She must have been dreaming.

Next door she heard the Shah boys bump and hurtle down the stairs as they got ready for school. She felt a mild irritation as she reached for her dressing gown. On first arriving in her new home, she'd found listening to the

soundtrack of other peoples' lives quite disturbing, but now she usually didn't notice it. Drawing the fabric close around her, Kate walked to the bathroom

The mirror above the basin reflected dark ringed eyes and a greyish tinge to her flesh, signs of sleeplessness that were well-known to her. She washed in tepid water, with a shiver, reaching, blindly, for a towel as soap got in her eyes. She applied moisturiser and slapped some colour into her cheeks. Her teeth were brushed with determined vigour. Returning to the bedroom she studied her flaccid, speckled skin as she pulled on her sensible trousers and shirt. Kate sighed. She went downstairs and picked up the post from the mat.

With a small shock she saw her sister's distinctive handwriting. Appearing like a genie once the lamp is polished, thought Kate, wondering if her own thoughts could conjure her sister. She had often tried the opposite. Many times during their childhood Kate had wished her sister away, with no discernable effect. She tore open the envelope.

Inside, the note read - 'Near you next week for rehearsals. I'll pop by Monday evening and see your new place, B.'

So, she would arrive tonight. Shopping would be necessary.

Kate decided not to put it off and, within the hour, she had parked her car and was striding along the wide aisles at the nearest over-lit food hall. This was where she had come to shop when she and Pete, her husband, used to entertain, but she hadn't been here for about a year. Well-used now to the darts of pain an unlooked-for memory caused, Kate banished sentiment and got on with things. She walked the aisles with a powerful stride, scattering groups of pensioners, who fluttered and chuntered at her passing.

As she picked up sugar snaps Kate was seized by another vivid memory, of two young girls sitting in the light of a stained glass window, shelling peas. The amber, blue and green light dappled their hands and faces, turned their darting movements into a nacreous under-sea dance. Kate was surprised at how deeply she was affected by the recollection of her childhood as she stood at the checkout, listening to the regular plashing of the fountain in the shopping centre beyond.

Twenty minutes later, when Kate turned into Padua Road, she saw Bianca's lipstick red convertible already parked at the kerb outside her house. Her sister had always been unreliable with dates and times.

Kate pulled on to her drive and sat, amazed yet again, at how easily her sister could throw her off balance. After all these years, Bianca could still annoy her like nobody else could. Shaking her head, she climbed from the car. As she lifted carriers from the boot, she heard the sound of a door opening.

'Thank you so much,' Bianca came into view from next door's brick porch. 'Yes. No. She's home now.'

There was Mr Shah, at home for his lunch, simpering and giving a little wave to the celebrity, as Bianca stepped daintily down his gravel drive in her kitten heels.

She looked older. The white-gold hair, still worn long, was paler and less silky, the skin wrinkled around her eyes and mouth. Not tall, as Kate was, Bianca was small-boned and perfect, yet now her waist had thickened. Kate was startled to feel an unexpected sadness at the change in her sister, but she had little time to consider it before Bianca was upon her, giving yelps of delight.

'Long time no see.' Bianca drew her into an expansive embrace and Kate visualised curtains twitching all along Padua Road. 'Just look at your lovely little house!'

Still playing to the gallery, Kate thought.

'Hello there, could you take these bags?' was what Kate said, handing over the carriers and groping for her door keys in her handbag. Laughing, Bianca took the bags. As Kate unlocked the door she propped herself up against the wall of the house with one hand.

'Have you been shopping on my account – killing the fatted calf?'

'Well, you're a guest,' said Kate and ushered her sister inside. 'I don't have many.'

'Dear me,' Bianca laughed, as they went through to the kitchen at the back of the house. 'Still scaring everyone away, sis? Oh, what a fine garden!'

Kate believed that she knew her sister well enough to detect genuine admiration and was absurdly pleased.

'It is good, isn't it,' she said, looking outside. The garden was a large one and she had worked hard on it, clearing out the old herbaceous borders to

reveal the roses. 'I haven't seen it in spring yet, I don't know what will grow. It's quite exciting.'

Kate felt her sister's gaze upon her and turned. Bianca was looking at her, eyebrows raised and mouth slightly open.

'Let me help you unpack,' she said. She reached into the shopping bags. 'I was going to take you out, to *Bella Roma*. If it's still there? It seems so long since I was last here. Strange when you think we grew up so close by. Would you mind if I stayed for two nights? It'll be fun.'

Kate watched her sister put items away in all the right places. Was that family similarity or just logic? But Bianca was telling her about her latest role. Kate tuned in.

'So it's quite a coup really and, after all, I can't go on playing the ingenue forever. I'm almost forty!'

Kate's eyebrows rose.

'Oh, all right. But that's what it says in my publicity.'

Could someone flounce verbally, wondered Kate, as her sister continued? Then she realised that Bianca was putting a brave face on things. The part was a supporting role, the name above the title going to a soap star, a younger version of Bianca. The play was in the provinces to allow time for the young person to learn to act upon a stage. Or to act at all, Kate sniffed. Bianca could certainly do that.

'We aren't actually performing yet, we're just walking though,' Bianca sounded defensive. What was she expecting? 'So I thought I'd look you up.'

'And I'm glad you did,' Kate felt a wave of spontaneous affection and hugged her. 'We'll have a fine time,' she said.

It was Bianca's turn to raise an eyebrow, but she smiled and said nothing.

For the next hour Kate showed off her house and garden and let her enthusiasm get the better of her.

'You're so lucky, having a garden, especially like this,' Bianca said. 'My flat doesn't have so much as a window box.'

'I wouldn't be without it,' Kate replied. 'It gives me a focus for all my surplus energy, now that Celia has gone.'

'How is Celia? How's she taken it all?'

'She's well. She's happily settled at college now and will cope.'

Kate assumed that the details of her daughter would bore Bianca and make herself, Kate, seem provincial and dull. So she didn't mention the worry and the hours of work to get Celia through her exams, or the overwhelming relief when the results arrived and with them the news that Celia would be off to Oxford.

'How about lunch?' Kate asked as she reached for a corkscrew.

The sisters prepared a meal more suited to a Mediterranean summer than a cold January day in a post-industrial northern English town. They took trouble to make it good, laying the table in the garden window. Kate found a pitcher for chilled water, to accompany the wine. They sat and ate, watching the birds at the feeder in the garden.

'How are you, Katherina?'

It had been a long time since someone had called her by her given name. Even as a girl she had been Katherine, at home and to her friends. It was around the time she met her husband that she became Kate.

'All right,' Kate responded, after a pause. 'I keep busy. I'm teaching, which is satisfying, as well as keeping the wolf from the door.'

Kate suddenly didn't want to talk about her work. She felt unsettled, thrown out of joint. Perhaps it was alcohol at lunchtime, or having had so little sleep the night before? Kate told Bianca about her dream, for she had rationalized it as such, of the invisible cat.

'How interesting,' Bianca sipped her wine. 'You could feel and hear the cat, but you couldn't see it?'

'It wasn't there. In the dream I mean.'

'Just because you couldn't see it doesn't mean it wasn't there. Audiences often see things which aren't there, or don't see things that are.'

'In the theatre,' Kate looked down her nose.

'It's more than mechanics and a willingness to be fooled, you know,' Bianca put down her glass. 'Imagination is a powerful thing.' She studied her sister. 'Maybe your 'cat' comes with the house?'

'A ghost? Hmm, I don't know. If it was, wouldn't I have seen it before?'

'Perhaps you weren't ready for it,' Bianca replied. 'Or it wasn't ready for you. If it returns, try and speak to it?'

'I have yet to meet a cat that can talk,' Kate frowned.

'You'd be surprised what happens in dreams,' Bianca gave Kate a speculative look. 'It was a dream, wasn't it?'

'Finished?' Kate collected up their plates. Of course it was a dream.

Bianca poured more wine and the sisters watched daylight diminish and darkness gather beneath the rhododendrons. Kate lit the lamp and took things away, returning with coffee, as shapes merged in the garden beyond the glass. It was almost five when they rose.

'I'll get my bags,' Bianca went into the hall. 'They're still in the car.'

As she tidied and cleaned, Kate reflected on the pleasure of her afternoon. It was good to see her sister again. They would dine out that evening and Kate felt as if on holiday, her spirit lighter. Her benign mood triumphed even when she climbed the stairs to find her sister already in possession of the bathroom.

Kate closed her inadequate bedroom curtains and opened her wardrobe with a flourish, determined to dress well. She almost laughed out loud as she heard her sister singing in the shower.

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Heels clicking on road and pavement Kate and Bianca walked through the town centre, deserted in the evening, to the restaurant. Kate's car was parked just five minutes away. Inside they were met by warmth and soft light. The place was divided into little booths by frosted glass screens, lending an air of intrigue which the sisters had always enjoyed. On a Monday night in early January more than half the booths were empty. They surrendered their coats and slid into the banquette seats, taking menus.

A young waiter hovered.

Bianca deployed her twinkling smile and soon champagne arrived, with the compliments of the house.

Not for the first time Kate wondered how her sister did it. How did she charm a stranger, a lover or a sister? Charm made life so much easier. Kate recalled Bianca using her magic even when they were children. To get her way, a new dress, a thing that Kate wanted. Yet Bianca had never manipulated their mother, Kate was certain. That came after mother was gone. Kate remembered their sad little family after their mother died, her own unhappiness and isolation.

Il Signor came to take their order and then returned to the kitchen. Bianca raised her glass.

'To us,' she said.

'To us,' Kate echoed.

Over steaming bowls of pasta the sisters talked, enjoying each other's company. They began, tentatively at first, to talk about their shared history, their childhood, each stepping carefully around remembered fault lines.

'Do you remember our old music teacher?' Bianca asked.

'I do, he was always bringing presents for you and you misbehaved, wickedly.'

'And I would always blame you,' Bianca gave a rueful smile.

'Father would always believe you. And I'd be punished.'

'I wasn't very nice to you was I? But then, you weren't very nice to me. It took ages for my hair to grow back where you pulled it out.' Bianca's hand rose to touch the side of her head

Kate was nonplussed. She had only recently become reacquainted with her old self - the self before she was married - and she didn't know how to react to that other being. What had happened to all that youthful promise and energy? How had it become so negative and enraged?

'I was always so angry, I don't know why,' Kate said.

'You weren't the only one. I felt so abandoned when mother died.'

'Yes and poor father. So broken and completely out of his depth.'

The sisters were silent for a while.

'You didn't stay for long after his funeral.' Bianca didn't accuse, but Kate bridled.

'I couldn't. It was Pete's book launch.' Kate flushed. She had gone to the launch party so as to reject or confirm her suspicions about Pete and a secretary - so banal. She was ashamed of having rushed away so soon, the coffin had barely been put into the ground. She was ashamed of her servitude to her ex-husband. 'I should have stayed,' Kate apologised.

'Your attachment to Pete frightened me,' Bianca said. 'It was so fierce.'

For a few moments neither could think of anything else to say.

'I've often asked myself.....'

'You mustn't seek to blame....'

Both sisters stopped.

'I was so frightened when mother died. And you were so frightening,' Bianca shook her head, struggling to express her thoughts. 'You were ferocious, all will and pain. I was so hurt, but no one could see me. You and your tantrums were in the way.'

Kate didn't know what to say, so she stirred her coffee. She hadn't really considered the period after her mother's death. And she wasn't at all sure she wanted to. But perhaps Bianca was right, perhaps that was when her rage had begun? In any case, she thought, wryly, Bianca wouldn't let her wriggle out of discussing it now. Her sister's tenacity was surprising. As was her own capacity to recollect, once she had begun, her reactions to the defining event of their childhood, the death of their mother.

She remembered that her life had seemed to stop and all the good things seemed to be gone. She'd been desperate for her mother not to be dead. For the first time Kate realised where her girlhood anger had come from. It was anger at that maternal desertion and at her own powerlessness to do anything about it.

'I think we should talk some more,' suggested Kate.

'I'd like that,' Bianca replied.

Kate signalled for the bill.

Amid exhortations for them to return more quickly next time, the sisters donned coats and gloves and stepped out into the night, both gasping at the cold. Bianca slipped her arm through her sister's as they crossed to the car park. Their long shadows preceded them in the blue-white glare of the street lamp, Kate's tall and angular and Bianca's soft and fuzzy. As she slipped into the driver's seat, Kate heard Bianca's gurgling laugh begin.

'It's like the old days,' she chortled, as Kate put the Fiat into gear. 'The Minola girls hit town.' They laughed as the car pulled away.

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Almost a week later, Kate checked that the back door was locked and carried her cocoa upstairs. Her sister had left that afternoon and Kate felt strangely bereft. Bianca had stayed, driving to her 'read through' then returning to Padua Road with scurrilous stories about the cast, especially the soap star.

When term started Bianca had even accompanied Kate to the departmental drinks party, charming all who attended. Kate had watched her own stock rise with some of her colleagues because of her sister and she felt ridiculous, and proud.

The sisters had talked for hours, at times gentle, at others challenging, trampling on each other's sensitivities. For the first time in many years Kate felt close to her sister and, while she was exhausted and raw, she was also stronger for it. It seemed as if she had acquired another skin.

Now the house was silent again, there were no more impromptu bursts of song. Yet only an hour ago Celia had phoned and Kate told her all about her sister's visit. Celia seemed pleased, but withdrawn and Kate sensed that her daughter was perplexed. She would be coming home for Easter, only ten weeks away now. They could talk then. Kate was already planning and looking forward. Easter was early this year.

Kate placed her mug on the little bedside table, wound her clock and set the alarm. She twitched the curtains further over, reminding herself, yet again, to buy some thicker ones, or at least exchange them for others in the house. She heard the thump as the heating switched off. Quickly she supped her cocoa, turned off the lamp and drew the duvet up to her ears. Now she was tired and drowsy.

She was almost asleep when she felt the arrival of the visitor at the foot of the bed.

Kate opened her eyes, yet did not move. She kept her breathing even and soon it mingled with the deep purring of the cat. Her fear was still there, but she was also curious. She felt the pressure on the duvet as the creature moved, it didn't settle as it had done before, but stepped towards the pillows. The purr grew louder, as the creature drew near.

Kate swallowed hard. What had Bianca advised? She folded back the duvet, without raising her head. The purring ceased.

'Hello, cat,' she said quietly.

The purring re-commenced.

Her eyes grew accustomed to the shards of light and dark and she thought that she saw the pillow beside her own depress. There was a flash of an eye and the purr slowed and deepened.

‘Welcome, cat. I’m Kate, known as Katherine, christened Katherina. This is my house now, as well as yours. I was born near here and was happy. But my mother died and my life and my sister’s life changed beyond anything we could imagine.’ She stopped for a breath. ‘For twenty years I loved a man who loved my father’s money as much as he loved me, though he did love me, cat, at least at first.’ She paused, her throat constricted. ‘I have a daughter, Celia, who is reading English at Oxford and full of brightness. She will visit soon and you may meet her, if you will. I’m so proud of her, cat, and I love her deeply.’

The Shahs’ front door slammed and feet crunched down the gravel drive.

‘Someone’s out late,’ Kate said. ‘I’m a teacher, of splendid stories and fine ideas, although not my own. I’m a gardener, too, but only now have a garden I can say is all mine. I wait to see what grows. All manner of things, I hope.’

In the bars of orange light Kate glimpsed a gleaming, white face with small, pointed ears above shaggy paws and tail. The cat was almost visible. She laughed silently.

‘I think we shall get on well together, Cat.’

Kate turned over, smiling and content, the soft purr lulling her to sleep. She would get to know her visitor, just as she had got to know herself, she thought. Though maybe the cat thought of her as the visitor? Either way, they would watch the garden grow.

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