

The Cough

It was a short cough, or rather something halfway between a cough and a throat-clearing. Not very loud, but quite distinct. It was very, very familiar, but at that moment completely terrifying. He sat up in a panic and groped desperately for the bedside light switch. It was nearly midnight. There was no one in bed beside him. The room was empty. He got out of bed and switched on the main light, to be sure. He went to check the rest of the house, turning on all the lights. Nothing. Through the sitting room window, he could see most of the garden, but despite his feeling of dread, he went out into the night with a torch. The flowerbeds and the newly-dug vegetable plot were undisturbed. Everything was just as he'd left it.

In his imagination, he heard the nightmarish cough again. It had seemed to be right there in the bedroom. Could it have been a dream? No, he had definitely been awake. In fact, he had not been to sleep at all. He placed a chair against the inside of the bedroom door and went back to bed, lying rigid, waiting for something to happen. His subconscious filled the interminable hours with terrors, both vague and troublingly specific, but eventually sleep claimed him.

The following morning, he realised he needed to get away. He left the city, driving north through the rain, not hurrying. He found himself in Edinburgh and booked into a Premier Inn. The hotel room was reassuringly identical to every other budget hotel he had ever been in. He and Beth had enjoyed their recent holiday in Wales, where they'd stayed in the Premier Inn outside Bangor. At least, he'd thought Beth had enjoyed it. It turned out to be their last holiday together before she told him she was leaving.

He ate at the Brewers Fair pub next door and fell soundly asleep in the chilly room. There was no coughing.

The next day was sunny but cool as he drove further north, into Perthshire, and found a hill trail. As he plodded steadily up the mountain, the landscape

opened up around him. He sat on a rock by the side of the path to eat his Tesco sandwiches and absorb the scene. There was almost no wind. Occasionally a white cloud briefly obscured the sun. A lark was trilling. He felt almost at peace, not missing Beth as much as he feared.

The cough came very clearly, from his left, less than a meter away. He snapped round, but there was nothing there. He jerked to his feet and started running back down the hill, abandoning the packet of sandwiches. He stumbled and fell forwards, but hardly felt the grazes on his hands and face as he picked himself up from the heather and plunged on down.

Back in the relative safety of the car, he tried to calm down, to understand. It was her cough, no question - something she often did just before asking him to do a task she knew he didn't want to. It *must* be imagination. Beth was not there. She could not be there.

He needed to escape, to go far away: abroad would be best. He started checking flights on his phone and managed to book a flight from Edinburgh to Istanbul leaving at ten o'clock the next day. He had never been to Turkey, but it didn't matter where he went - he just wanted to get away. After a sleepless night in the hotel, he arrived at the airport early and sat in a row of seats in the departure lounge watching holidaymakers and business people come and go. The bustle and half-heard conversations were comfortingly normal and he relaxed. He moved to the departure gate, which was almost deserted - it was over an hour until boarding was due to start.

The cough was unmistakable and very close to his right ear. He cried out in horror and dismay, lurched out of his seat and fell to the floor. People turned to look, and a passing ground crew worker used his radio to call someone. As he lay weeping, an armed policeman knelt down beside him. He managed to stammer his name, then, a bit more clearly and with the sense of an immense burden being lifted, he said "I want to confess to the murder of my wife Elizabeth. She's buried in the garden."