

Half-mown Lawn

Annie is ready for an empty house by the time everyone has finally gone home. She spends the first hour or so flitting from room to room, straightening cushions and rescuing the odd missed wine glass from the bookshelves upstairs, before ending up in her rocking chair staring out the bedroom window as frail white clouds sidle past.

5 Below, the long grass of the half-mown lawn shivers in the wind, the mower still stood at the checkpoint between the cut and uncut. Where the grass is short, blades poke from the soil like a crew cut. The shape pressed into the long grass calls for her attention but she refuses its demands.

At the kitchen table, Annie tears a piece of paper from a message pad. She writes the name of the local store at the top. Underneath she writes headings: Frozen, Fresh, Dairy, Fruit/Veg,
10 Household. Underneath each she creates columns of her needs, organising oven-chips, apples, sponge scourers and skimmed milk into manageable groups. Under the heading Fresh she writes whole chicken. The words hold her for a moment before she crosses them through with a single line and writes chicken breast in the space beneath.

She stands in the pantry, waiting for the empty spaces on the shelves to reveal what is missing
15 from her list. The gaps between the pickle jars, rows of cereal boxes and tinned goods are indecipherable, redacted text that she cannot make sense of. Back at the table she turns over her paper and makes another list. On it she writes,

Things I will miss:

20 *Him polishing his shoes every morning*

The way he looked in a suit

His mixing five different types of cereal for breakfast

The quiet knock of his briefcase on the hall floor

The sound of his breath, warm on my back at four in the morning

25

She continues like this until long past the local shop's closing time, resigns herself to driving to the all-night Tesco¹.

30 In the aisles, Annie searches for the items on her list, filling her trolley with washing-up liquid, onions, bread and those biscuits he liked. As each item drops into the trolley, she crosses a list entry out with an Ikea pencil found in her coat pocket. She flips the list to check the back and finds herself staring at the things she will miss. Her eyes flick up at the signs hanging from the false ceiling of the supermarket, as if simply by looking she will find the section he is hiding in.

At the checkout she places her shopping on the conveyor, slotting a customer divider directly
35 behind her things. Her items move slowly toward the till and she rearranges them, grouping together the fruit and vegetables, the dairy, the household goods. The checkout girl swipes the shopping through in a flurry of bleeps and Annie struggles to keep pace as she fills up her bags for life.

¹ Tesco: britisk supermarkedskæde

'£57.81,' says the checkout girl.

40 Annie rummages in her handbag.

'I seem to have left my purse at home,' she says.

The checkout girl huffs then hits the button next to the till to call a supervisor.

'It's my first day. I don't know what to do about this,' she says.

'I don't know what to do either,' Annie says, her eyes checking the aisle signs once more.

45

Annie takes two eggs, a slice of ham, the cheese and the last of the tomatoes from the fridge. The oil warming in her small omelette pan, she cracks the eggs into a cup and scrambles the yolks with a fork. The ham and tomato sit in chopped piles beside a mound of grated cheddar.

50 The puddle of oil spreads across the frying pan, seeking the heat, and she waits until it is ready before pouring out the eggs. She sprinkles ham, then tomato, then cheese, letting each sink into the surface of the egg before adding the next. Once finished, she deposits the omelette onto a clean plate, leaving the pan and chopping board beside the cooling hob.

55 On the table a single space is laid and she empties the remains of a bottle of red into her wine glass. She takes her time with the meal, slicing small mouthfuls from the omelette, her wine sitting untouched beside her plate. In this way she avoids the kitchen window.

Paul, Jenny and the grandkids stayed behind after friends and family had gone home. Jenny busied herself, stacking the glasses and plates into the dishwasher.

'I could mow the lawn for you, Mum,' Paul said.

60 'Don't you fucking touch it,' Annie heard herself scream.

A beat of silence followed before the children whispered 'Granny did a swear' and Jenny ushered them into the kitchen for ice cream. Flushed, Annie collapsed into an armchair but didn't cry.

'It's okay, Mum,' Paul told her. But it wasn't.

65 Now, Annie picks up the phone and dials his number.

'Mum?' he says. 'Is everything okay? Do you need me to come over?'

'Can you mow the lawn tomorrow?' is all she says.

'Of course. You're sure?'

She presses the end call button without replying.

70

Annie removes the dirty dishes from the dish washer and places them in order upon the work surface, before turning on both taps. The sink fills quickly and she takes each item from the pile and scrubs them in the soapy water. The caked-on stains of the Pyrex dishes² take time and elbow grease to remove. Twice she empties the sink replacing the brown greasy water with fresh suds.

75 The draining board is soon crammed and she pulls a clean tea towel from the drawer. Each item is dried and tucked away in the kitchen cupboards, one at a time, even the cutlery, before she refills the sink a third time and sets about the final pile of dirty crockery. Only now, with the garden growing indistinct in the dusk, does Annie look out through the kitchen window at the dimming outline of the shape in the grass, her hands continuing to scrub at food stains already removed.

80

Annie shuts off the lights in the front room and takes her book and a cup of jasmine tea upstairs.

² Pyrex dish: ildfast fad

85 She sits in the rocking chair, her book on her lap and lets her tea grow cold. When, finally, she looks down at the shape in the grass it is barely visible in the dim light provided by the nearby street lamps.

90 Only days ago, though it already feels much longer, she sat in the rocker by the window, reading, as he started the job. She had smiled, glancing down at him mowing the lawn, before losing herself in her book. It was the sound of the mower shutting off, too soon for him to have finished, that pulled her from her reading. When he turned to look up at the window she saw it in his face. He crumpled onto the lawn as she rose from her chair.

95 Annie flosses, careful to run the white thread deep below the gum line where plaque forms, just as the hygienist showed her. She brushes her teeth for the full two minutes. In the mirror her mouth fills with toothpaste foam until she has to spit. A quick cold-water rinse then she switches off the en-suite light and closes the door behind her.

100 Their double bed has fresh sheets; probably Jenny being helpful. Annie climbs in her side of the bed, lies facing where he should be. There is no indentation or crease in the bottom sheet or pillow on his side, any trace of him smoothed out when the sheets were replaced. She scoots over and buries her face in his pillow but it is the smell of detergent that fills her nostrils.

Unable to sleep, Annie pulls her dressing gown about her, walks downstairs, slips on her garden shoes and steps slowly out, taking care only to walk on the mown part of the lawn. The summer night air is warm even for the time of year. Where he fell, the shape of him remains pressed in the long grass.

105 Annie crouches and runs her finger around his outline, the compacted grass inside like a crop circle in the shape of a man. She strokes where his cheek pressed to the ground, almost sees his face bristling with irritation as it did the morning she complained about the unmown lawn.

110 Without looking around, she climbs into the outline of him and lays down, careful to keep herself entirely within its boundaries. She gently places her head on his broad chest, spooning her legs onto his, just as she used to when they were younger. The smell of cut grass is an embrace now, where, in the hospital, kissing the fingers of his cooling hands, it had overwhelmed her. Annie lies still and listens for his heartbeat.

(2011)