

I

Saturday 17 July 2010

I lie on my back with my eyes closed, waiting for Kit's breathing to change. I fake the deep, slow sleep-breaths I need to hear from him before I can get out of bed – *in and hold, out and hold* – and try to convince myself that it's a harmless deception. Am I the only woman who has ever done this, or does it happen all the time in houses all over the world? If it does, then it must be for different reasons, more common ones than mine: a cheating wife or girlfriend wanting to text a lover undetected, or sneak one last guilty glass of wine on top of the five she's had already. Normal things. Ordinary urgencies.

No woman on earth has ever been in the situation I'm in now.

You're being ridiculous. You're not 'in a situation', apart from the one you've brewed in your imagination. Ingredients: coincidence and paranoia.

Nothing I tell myself works. That's why I need to check, to put my mind at rest. Checking isn't crazy; missing the opportunity to check would be crazy. And once I've looked and found nothing, I'll be able to forget about it and accept that it's all in my head.

Will you?

It shouldn't be too long before I can move. Kit's usually dead to the world within seconds of the light going out. If I count

to a hundred . . . but I can't. Can't make myself focus on something that doesn't interest me. If I could, I'd be able to do the reverse: banish 11 Bentley Grove from my mind. Will I ever be able to do that?

While I wait, I rehearse for the task ahead. What would this bedroom tell me about Kit and me, if I didn't know us? Huge bed, cast-iron fireplace, identical alcoves on either side of the chimney breast where our two identical wardrobes stand. Kit likes symmetry. One of his reservations, when I proposed buying the biggest bed we could find to replace our ordinary double, was that it might not leave room for our matching bedside cabinets. When I said I'd be happy to lose mine, Kit looked at me as if I was an anarchist agitator plotting to demolish his well-ordered world. 'You can't have a cabinet on one side and not the other,' he said. Both ended up going in the end; having first made me promise not to tell anyone, Kit admitted that, however inconvenient it was to have to lean down and put his book, watch, glasses and mobile phone under the bed, he would find it more irritating to have a bedroom that didn't 'look right'.

'Are you sure you're a genuine, bona fide heterosexual?' I teased him.

He grinned. 'Either I am, or else I'm pretending to be in order to get my Christmas cards written and posted for me every year. I guess you'll never know which is the truth.'

Floor-length cream silk curtains. Kit wanted a Roman blind, but I overruled him. Silk curtains are something I've wanted since childhood, one of those 'as soon as I have a home of my own' pledges I made to myself. And curtains in a bedroom have to pool on the floor – that's my look-right rule. I suppose everybody has at least one, and we all think our own are sensible and other people's completely ridiculous.

Above the fireplace, there's a framed tapestry of a red house with a green rectangle around it that's supposed to be the garden. Instead of flowers, the solid colour of the grass is broken up by stitched words: 'Melrose Cottage, Little Holling, Silsford' in orange, and then, in smaller yellow letters beneath, 'Connie and Kit, 13th July 2004'.

'But Melrose isn't red,' I used to protest, before I gave up. 'It's made of white clunch stone. Do you think Mum was picturing it drenched in blood?' Kit and I called our house 'Melrose' for short when we first bought it. Now that we've lived here for years and know it like we know our own faces, we call it 'Mellers'.

What would an impartial observer make of the tapestry? Would they think Kit and I were so stupid that we were in danger of forgetting our names and when we bought our house? That we'd decided to hang a reminder on the wall? Would they guess that it was a home-made house-warming present from Connie's mother, and that Connie thought it was twee and crass, and had fought hard to have it exiled to the loft?

Kit insisted we put it up, out of loyalty to our home and to Mum. He said our bedroom was the perfect place, so that then guests wouldn't see it. I don't think he notices it any more. I do – every night before I go to sleep and every morning when I wake up. It depresses me for a whole range of reasons.

Someone peering into our bedroom would see none of this – none of the wrangles, none of the compromises. They wouldn't see Kit's missing bedside table, the picture I'd have liked to put above the fireplace if only the hideous red house tapestry weren't there.

Which proves that looking at a room in someone else's house doesn't tell you anything, and there's no point in my doing

what I'm about to do, now that I'm sure Kit's sound asleep. I ought to go to sleep too.

As quietly as I can, I fold back my side of the duvet, climb out of bed and tiptoe to the second bedroom, which we've turned into a home office. We run our business from here, which is a little absurd given that it's about eleven feet long by ten feet wide. Like Kit's and my bedroom, it has a cast-iron fireplace. We've managed to cram two desks in here, a chair for each of us, three filing cabinets. When our certificate of incorporation arrived from Companies House, Kit bought a frame for it and hung it on the wall opposite the door, so that it's the first thing that catches your eye when you walk into the room. 'It's a legal requirement,' he told me when I complained that it looked uninspiring and bureaucratic. 'Has to be displayed at company headquarters. Do you want Nulli to start life as an outlaw?'

Nulli Secundus Ltd. It means 'second to none', and was Kit's choice. 'Talk about tempting fate and dooming us to failure,' I said when we were discussing what to call ourselves, imagining how much worse liquidation would feel with such a conceited name. I suggested 'C & K Bowskill Ltd'. 'Those are *our* names,' Kit said scathingly, as if this fact might have passed me by. 'Have a bit of imagination, for God's sake. Confidence would help, too. Are we launching this company in order to go bankrupt? I don't know about you, but I'm planning to make a success of it.'

What else have you made a success of, Kit? What else that I don't know about?

You're being ridiculous, Connie. Your ridiculousness is second to none.

I tap my laptop's touchpad and it springs to life. The

Google screen appears. I type ‘houses for sale’ into the search box, press enter, and wait. The first result that comes up is Roundthehouses.co.uk, which declares itself the UK’s leading property website. I click on it, thinking that obviously the Roundthehouses people subscribe to Kit’s way of thinking rather than mine: they have no worries about bankruptcy-induced humiliation.

The home page loads: exterior shots of houses for sale beneath a dark red border filled in with lots of tiny pictures of magnifying glasses, each with a disembodied pair of eyes inside it. The eyes look eerie, alien, and make me think of people hiding in the darkness, spying on one another.

Isn’t that exactly what you’re doing?

I type ‘Cambridge’ into the location box, and click on the ‘For Sale’ button. Another screen comes up, offering me more choices. I work my way through them impatiently – search radius: this area only; property type: houses; number of bedrooms: any; price range: any; added to site . . . When would 11 Bentley Grove have been added? I click on ‘last 7 days’. The ‘For Sale’ board I saw in the front garden today – or yesterday, since it’s now quarter past one in the morning – wasn’t there a week ago.

I click on ‘Find properties’, tapping my bare feet on the floor, and close my eyes for a second. When I open them, there are houses on the screen: one on Chaucer Road for 4 million pounds, one on Newton Road for 2.3 million. I know both streets – they’re near Bentley Grove, off Trumpington Road. I’ve seen them, on my many trips to Cambridge that nobody knows about.

11 Bentley Grove is the third house on the list. It’s on for 1.2 million pounds. I’m surprised it’s so expensive. It’s big

enough, but nothing spectacular. Obviously that part of Cambridge is regarded as a choice area, though it's always looked fairly ordinary to me, and the traffic on Trumpington Road is often waiting to move rather than moving. There's a Waitrose nearby, an Indian restaurant, a specialist wine shop, a couple of estate agents. *And lots of enormous expensive mansions.* If the asking prices for all the houses in this part of town are into the millions, that means there must be plenty of people who can afford to pay that much. Who are they? Sir Cliff Richard springs to mind; I've no idea why. Who else? People who own football clubs, or have oil wells in their back gardens? Certainly not me and Kit, and we're doing about as well, professionally, as we could ever hope to do . . .

I shake these thoughts from my mind. *You could be asleep now, you lunatic. Instead, you're sitting hunched over a computer in the dark, feeling inferior to Cliff Richard. Get a grip.*

To bring up the full details, I click on the picture of this house I know so well, and yet not at all. I don't believe anyone in the world has spent as much time staring at the outside of 11 Bentley Grove as I have; I know its façade brick by brick. It's strange, almost shocking, to see a photograph of it on my computer – in my house, where it doesn't belong.

Inviting the enemy into your home . . .

There is no enemy, I tell myself firmly. *Be practical, get it over with, and go back to bed.* Kit has started to snore. Good. I've no idea what I'd say if he caught me doing this, how I'd defend my sanity.

The page has loaded. I'm not interested in the big photograph on the left, the one taken from across the road. It's the inside of the house I need to see. One by one, I click on the little pictures on the right-hand side of the screen to enlarge

them. First, a kitchen with wooden worktops, a double Belfast sink, blue-painted unit fronts, a blue-sided wooden-topped island . . .

Kit hates kitchen islands. He thinks they're ugly and pretentious – an affectation imported from America. The avocado bathroom suites of the future, he calls them. He'd got rid of the one in our kitchen within a fortnight of our moving in, and commissioned a local joiner to make us a big round oak table to take its place.

This kitchen I'm looking at can't be Kit's, not with that island in it.

Of course it's not Kit's. Kit's kitchen is downstairs – it also happens to be your kitchen.

I click on a picture of a lounge. I've seen 11 Bentley Grove's lounge before, though only briefly. On one of my visits, I was brave enough – or stupid enough, depending on your point of view – to open the gate, walk up the long path that's bordered by lavender bushes on both sides and divides the square front lawn into two triangles, and peer in through the front window. I was afraid I'd be caught trespassing and couldn't really concentrate. A few seconds later an elderly man with the thickest glasses I've ever seen emerged from the house next door and turned his excessively enlarged eyes in my direction. I hurried back to my car before he could ask me what I was doing, and, afterwards, remembered little about the room I'd seen apart from that it had white walls and a grey L-shaped sofa with some kind of intricate red embroidery on it.

I'm looking at that same sofa now, on my computer screen. It's not so much grey as a sort of cloudy silver. It looks expensive, unique. I can't imagine there's another sofa like it.

Kit loves unique. He avoids mass-produced as far as is

possible. All the mugs in our kitchen were made and painted individually by a potter in Spilling.

Every piece of furniture in the lounge at 11 Bentley Grove looks like a one-off: a chair with enormous curved wooden arms like the bottoms of rowing boats; an unusual coffee table with a glass surface, and, beneath the glass, a structure resembling a display cabinet with sixteen compartments, lying on its back. Each compartment contains a small flower with a red circle at its centre and blue petals pointing up towards the glass.

Kit would like all of these things. I swallow, tell myself this proves nothing.

There's a tiled fireplace with a large map above it in a frame, a chimney breast, matching alcoves on either side. A symmetrical room, a Kit sort of room. I feel a little nauseous.

Christ, this is insane. How many living rooms, up and down the country, follow this basic format: fireplace, a chimney breast, alcoves left and right? It's a classic design, replicated all over the world. It appeals to Kit, and to about a trillion other people.

It's not as if you've seen his jacket draped over the banister, his stripy scarf over the back of a chair . . .

Quickly, wanting to be finished with this task I've set myself – aware that it's making me feel worse, not better – I work my way through the other rooms, enlarging their pictures. Hall and stairs, carpeted in beige; chunky dark wood banister. A utility room with sky-blue unit fronts, similar to those in the kitchen. Honey-coloured marble for the house bathroom – clean and ostentatiously expensive.

I click on a picture of what must be the back garden. It's a lot bigger than I'd have imagined, having only seen the house

from the front. I scroll down to the text beneath the photographs and see that the garden is described as being just over an acre. It's the sort of garden I'd love to have: decking for a table and chairs, two-seater swing with a canopy, vast lawn, trees at the bottom, lush yellow fields beyond. An idyllic countryside view, ten minutes' walk from the centre of Cambridge. Now I'm starting to understand the 1.2-million-pound price tag. I try not to compare what I'm looking at to Melrose Cottage's garden, which is roughly the size of half a single garage. It's big enough to accommodate a wrought-iron table, four chairs, a few plants in terracotta pots, and not a lot else.

That's it. I've looked at all the pictures, seen all there is to see.

And found nothing. Satisfied now?

I yawn and rub my eyes. I'm about to shut down the Round-the-houses website and go back to bed when I notice a row of buttons beneath the picture of the back garden: 'Street View', 'Floorplan', 'Virtual Tour'. I don't need a view of Bentley Grove – I've seen more than enough of it in the past six months – but I might as well have a look at number 11's floorplan, since I've got this far. I click on the button, then hit the 'x' to shut down the screen within seconds of it opening. It isn't going to help me to know which room is where; I'd be better off taking the virtual tour. Will it make me feel as if I'm walking around the house myself, looking into every room? That's what I'd like to do.

Then I'd be satisfied.

I hit the button and wait for the tour to load. Another button pops up: 'Play Tour'. I click on it. The kitchen appears first, and I see what I've already seen in the photograph, then a bit more as the camera does a 360-degree turn to reveal the rest

of the room. Then another turn, then another. The spinning effect makes me feel dizzy, as if I'm on a roundabout that won't stop. I close my eyes, needing a break. I'm so tired. Travelling to Cambridge and back in a day nearly every Friday is doing me no good; it's not the physical effort that's draining, it's the secrecy. I have to move on, let it go.

I open my eyes and see a mass of red. At first I don't know what I'm looking at, and then . . . *Oh, God. It can't be. Oh, fuck, oh, God.* Blood. A woman lying face down in the middle of the room, and blood, a lake of it, all over the beige carpet. For a second, in my panic, I mistake the blood for my own. I look down at myself. *No blood.* Of course not – it's not my carpet, not my house. It's 11 Bentley Grove. The lounge, spinning. The fireplace, the framed map above it, the door open to the hall . . .

The dead woman, face down in a sea of red. As if all the blood inside her has been squeezed out, every drop of it . . .

I make a noise that might be a scream. I try to call Kit's name, but it doesn't work. Where's the phone? Not on its base. Where's my BlackBerry? Should I ring 999? Panting, I reach out for something, I'm not sure what. I can't take my eyes off the screen. The blood is still turning, the dead woman slowly turning. *She must be dead; it must be her blood. Red around the outside, almost black in the middle. Black-red, thick as tar. Make it stop spinning.*

I stand up, knock my chair over. It falls to the floor with a thud. I back away from my desk, wanting only to escape. *Out, out!* a voice in my head screams. I'm stumbling in the wrong direction, nowhere near the door. *Don't look. Stop looking.* I can't help it. My back hits the wall; something hard presses into my skin. I hear a crash, step on something that crunches.

Pain pricks the soles of my feet. I look down and see broken glass. Blood. Mine, this time.

Somehow, I get myself out of the room and close the door. Better; now there's a barrier between it and me. *Kit*. I need Kit. I walk into our bedroom, switch on the light and burst into tears. How dare he be asleep? 'Kit!'

He groans. Blinks. 'Light off,' he mumbles, groggy with sleep. 'Fuck's going on? Time is it?'

I stand there crying, my feet bleeding onto the white rug.

'Con?' Kit hauls himself up into a sitting position and rubs his eyes. 'What's wrong? What's happened?'

'She's dead,' I tell him.



'Who's dead?' He's alert now. He reaches under the bed for his glasses, puts them on.

'I don't know! A woman,' I sob. 'On the computer.'

'What woman? What are you talking about?' He throws back the covers, gets out of bed. 'Your . . . what have you done to your feet? They're bleeding.'

'I don't know.' It's the best I can do. 'I did a virtual . . .' I'm having trouble breathing and speaking at the same time.

'Just tell me if everybody's okay. Your sister, Benji . . .'

'What?' My sister? 'It's nothing to do with them, it's a woman. I can't see her face.'

'You're white as a sheet, Con. Did you have a nightmare?'

'On my laptop. She's there now,' I sob. 'She's dead. She must be. We should call the police.'

'Sweetheart, there's no dead woman on your laptop,' Kit says. I hear the impatience beneath the reassurance. 'You had a bad dream.'

‘Go and look!’ I scream at him. ‘It’s not a dream. Go in there and see it for yourself!’

He looks down at my feet again, at the trail of blood on the rug and the floorboards – a dotted red line leading to the bedroom door. ‘What happened to you?’ he asks. I wonder how guilty I look. ‘What’s going on?’ The concerned tone has gone; his voice is hard with suspicion. Without waiting to hear my answer, he heads for the spare room.

‘No!’ I blurt out.

He stops on the landing. Turns. ‘No? I thought you wanted me to look at your computer.’ I’ve made him angry. Anything that interrupts his sleep makes him angry.

I can’t let him go in there until I’ve explained, or tried to. ‘I did a virtual tour of 11 Bentley Grove,’ I say.

‘*What?* For fuck’s sake, Connie.’

‘Listen to me. Just listen, okay? It’s for sale, 11 Bentley Grove is for sale.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I . . . I just know, all right?’ I wipe my face. If I’m under attack, I can’t cry. I have to concentrate on defending myself.

‘This is just . . . Connie, this is *so* fucked up, I don’t know where to . . .’ Kit pushes past me, tries to get back into bed.

I grab his arm to stop him. ‘Be angry later, but first listen to me. Okay? That’s all I’m asking.’

He shakes me off him. I hate the way he’s staring at me.

What do you expect him to do?

‘I’m listening,’ he says quietly. ‘I’ve been listening to you talk about 11 Bentley Grove for six months. When’s it going to stop?’

‘It’s for sale,’ I say, as calmly as I can. ‘I looked it up on Roundthehouses, a property website.’

‘When?’

‘Now, just . . . before.’

‘You waited until I was asleep?’ Kit shakes his head in disgust.

‘There was a virtual tour, and I . . . I thought I’d . . .’ It’s better if I don’t tell him what I was thinking. Not that he couldn’t guess. ‘There was a woman, in the lounge, face down on the floor, blood all around her, a huge pool . . .’ Describing it makes me feel as if I might throw up.

Kit takes a step back, looks at me as if he’s never seen me before. ‘Let’s get this straight: you went onto Roundthehouses, took a virtual tour of 11 Bentley Grove, which you happen to know is for sale, and saw a dead woman in one of the rooms?’

‘In the lounge.’

He laughs. ‘This is inventive, even for you,’ he says.

‘It’s still up on the screen,’ I tell him. ‘Go and look if you don’t believe me.’ I’m shaking, freezing cold suddenly.

He’s going to refuse. He’s going to ignore what I’ve told him and go back to sleep, to punish me, and because it can’t possibly be true. There can’t be a dead woman lying in a sea of blood on the Roundthehouses website.

Kit sighs. ‘Okay,’ he says. ‘I’ll go and look. Evidently I’m as big an idiot as you think I am.’

‘I’m not making it up!’ I shout after him. I want to go with him, but my body won’t move. *Any second now he’ll see what I saw.* I can’t bear the waiting, knowing it’s going to happen.

‘Great,’ I hear Kit say to himself. Or maybe he’s talking to me. ‘I’ve always wanted to look at a stranger’s dishwasher in the middle of the night.’

Dishwasher. The tour must be on a loop. In my absence, it’s started again at the beginning. ‘The obligatory kitchen island,’ Kit mutters. ‘Why do people do it?’

‘The lounge is after the kitchen,’ I tell him. I force myself onto the landing; that’s as close as I’m willing to go. I can’t breathe. I hate the thought that Kit’s about to see what I saw – no one should have to see it. It’s too horrible. At the same time, I need him to . . .

To what? Confirm that it was real, that you didn’t imagine it?

I don’t imagine things that aren’t there. *I don’t*. I sometimes worry about things that maybe don’t need to be worried about, but that’s not the same thing. I know what’s true and what isn’t. My name is Catriona Louise Bowskill. *True*. I’m thirty-four years old. *True*. I live at Melrose Cottage in Little Holling, Silsford, with my husband Christian, but he’s always been known as Kit, just as I’ve always been known as Connie. We have our own business – it’s called Nulli Secundus. We’re data management consultants, or rather, Kit is. My official title is Business and Financial Director. Kit works for Nulli full-time. I’m part-time: three days a week. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I work for my mum and dad’s business, Monk & Sons Fine Furnishings, where I have a more old-fashioned job title: book-keeper. My mum and dad are Val and Geoff Monk. They live down the road. I have a sister, Fran, who’s thirty-two. She also works for Monk & Sons; she runs the curtain and blind department. She has a partner, Anton, and they have a five-year-old son, Benji. All these things are true, and it’s also true – true in exactly the same way – that less than ten minutes ago I took a virtual tour of 11 Bentley Grove, Cambridge, and saw a dead woman lying on a blood-soaked carpet.

‘Bingo: the lounge,’ I hear Kit say. His tone sends a chill shooting up my spine. How can he sound so flippant, unless . . .

‘Interesting choice of coffee table. Trying a bit too hard, I’d say. No dead woman, no blood.’

What? What’s he talking about? He’s wrong. I know what I saw.

I push open the door and make myself walk into the room. *No. It’s not possible.* 11 Bentley Grove’s lounge turns slowly on the screen, but there’s no body in it – no woman lying face down, no pool of red. The carpet’s beige. Moving closer, I see that there’s a faint mark on it in one corner, but . . . ‘It’s not there,’ I say.

Kit stands up. ‘I’m going back to bed,’ he says, his voice stiff with fury.

‘But . . . how could it disappear?’

‘Don’t.’ He raises his fist, smacks it against the wall. ‘We’re not going to talk about this now. I’ve got a good idea: let’s never talk about it. Let’s pretend it didn’t happen.’

‘Kit . . .’

‘I can’t go on like this, Con. *We* can’t go on like this.’

He pushes past me. I hear our bedroom door slam. Too shocked to cry, I sit down in the chair that’s still warm from Kit’s body, and stare at the screen. When the lounge disappears, I wait for it to come back, in case the dead woman and the blood also come back. It seems unlikely, but then what’s happened already is also unlikely, and yet it happened.

I sit through the tour of 11 Bentley Grove four times. Each time the kitchen fades, I hold my breath. Each time the lounge returns spotless, with no dead woman or blood in it. Eventually, because I don’t know what else to do, I click on the ‘x’ in the top right-hand corner of the screen, shut the tour down.

Not possible.

One last time, starting from scratch. I click on the internet

Explorer icon, go back to Roundthehouses, retrace my steps: find 11 Bentley Grove again, click on the virtual tour button again, sit and watch. There's no woman. No blood. Kit is still right. I am still wrong.

I slam my laptop shut. I ought to clear up the broken glass, and the real bloodstains on my own carpet. I stare down at Nulli's certificate of incorporation, lying on the floor in its shattered frame. In my shock at seeing the dead woman, I must have knocked it off the wall. Kit will be upset about that. *As if he hasn't got enough to be upset about.*

Reframing a certificate is easy. Deciding what to do about a disappearing dead woman that you might have imagined in the first place – not so easy.

As far as I can see, I have two choices. I can either try to forget about it, talk myself into believing that the horrific scene I saw only ever existed in my mind. Or I can ring Simon Waterhouse.