

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

A photograph of a washing line in a garden. The line is strung across the garden and holds several items of clothing: a blue and white striped long-sleeved top and matching trousers, a yellow sleeveless dress, a white baby onesie, a light green long-sleeved top and matching trousers, and a white pair of trousers. A small patterned cloth is also hanging on the right. The garden is lush with green plants and flowers. In the background, there is a wooden shed and a large tree. The scene is viewed from a window or doorway, with a brick wall on the left and a window frame on the right.

*the washing
line*

MAXWELL VOSS

The Washing Line

The Washing Line

by

Maxwell Voss

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The Washing Line

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Chapter 1

William Thomson had broad shoulders and an easy laugh, and he was the sort of person that rooms seemed to tilt toward. At twenty-seven, he was tall and well-built in the way that suggested outdoor labour rather than the gym, though in fact he did both with three runs a week, weights on Thursdays, soccer on Sunday mornings with the same loose group of friends he'd had since university. At work, in the project management firm where he'd moved steadily up since graduating, he was known as someone who got things done without making it a performance. His manager called him reliable. His colleagues called him good company. His friends called him Will.

He was popular in the way that involves being genuinely liked rather than merely tolerated, and this surprised no one who'd spent ten minutes with him. He bought rounds without counting who owed what. He remembered the things people told him, the job interview they were nervous about, the parent who'd been unwell, the dog they'd had to have put down. He asked after those things at the right moments, not from calculation but because he actually listened. People felt attended to in his company without being able to say precisely why, and that quality, which he neither cultivated nor could easily have explained, had made him quietly indispensable in every group he'd ever been part of.

The only thing that puzzled anyone, said aloud occasionally and more often thought, was the absence of a girlfriend. At twenty-seven, good-looking, sociable, clearly not a disaster with women, because women obviously liked him, he had that effortless quality some men have without knowing it and yet nothing. No evidence of anyone. When his friend Marcus had asked him directly, after a long night at the pub, William had smiled and said something so perfectly deflecting that Marcus had come away without having received any information at all. When Jess, whom he'd known since the first year, had once wondered aloud to her boyfriend whether William might be

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gay, her boyfriend had said he didn't think so, couldn't say why, and the conversation had moved on. There was a version of Marcus's theory that was half-committed, half-joking, and William was aware of it the way you're aware of a distant noise, not troubling, just there.

The truth was not that he was gay. The truth was something else entirely.

On Thursdays after work, he went to the pub near the office with four or five colleagues for an hour, sometimes two. He drank one beer, occasionally two, always slowly, and was always the one to suggest heading off before things got rowdy. He stood up to leave with that good-natured ease of his, and nobody ever really minded, because it wasn't abruptness; it was just William being William. He'd be home by half past seven.

What nobody at the pub ever noticed, what nobody he'd ever known had ever noticed, was the very faint bulk at the waistband of his trousers where his shirt was tucked in. It was not dramatic. He wore well-cut clothes and moved with confidence, and if the line of his lower back was very slightly padded, there was nothing to suggest it was anything other than the ordinary topography of a man with good posture and a good build. He'd worn nappies continuously for so long that the way he walked had simply accommodated them. There was no waddle, no careful gait, no cautious self-consciousness. It was as natural as breathing.

Only on Sunday mornings did he go without. He changed before he left the house for soccer, the one concession, the one ninety minutes of ordinary bladder management that cost him more concentration than it would have cost anyone else to do something genuinely difficult. He played well despite it, or possibly because of it, the concentration lending his game a focus others attributed to competitive instinct. He was a good left midfielder, and he knew it and didn't make a thing of it. After the game, he changed again before the drive home, in the front seat of his car with his training bag in the

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back, quickly and with the practised ease of long habit. Nobody ever saw. Nobody was ever looking.

His bladder control, by any clinical measure, was technically adequate. That was the part he'd thought about carefully, in the way he thought about things he needed to be honest with himself over. He could get through the morning without incident if he concentrated. He could manage a meeting. He'd managed a whole Sunday morning of soccer without incident for seven years. But it required effort in a way that felt wrong, the wrong direction of exertion, like swimming against a current that didn't need swimming against. Nappies made sense in a way that went deeper than convenience, deeper than comfort, into something he'd long stopped trying to name precisely. They were his. He was theirs. That was simply how it was.

And the reason there was no girlfriend, the reason he deflected and smiled and said nothing useful when asked, was not that he couldn't imagine finding someone, not that he was incapable of it. It was that the first honest conversation would have to go somewhere, eventually, and he didn't know how to manage that eventuality. So he kept things contained. He went home. He was happy there. He was not lonely or dissatisfied.

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Chapter 2

The house was on a quiet street in an inner suburb, red brick, unremarkable from the outside. He'd bought it four years ago, and the first thing he'd done, before the kitchen renovation and before the new bathroom, was to have a builder he'd found through a specialist contractor who was recommended, discreet, and not a man who asked unnecessary questions to extend the existing basement. The house had come with a small undercroft, barely more than a crawlspace, the kind you found in Victorian-era terraces where the land sloped slightly, and the builder had been practical and unhurried about it. The result was something considerably more than a crawlspace.

The entry was in the back sitting room, behind the tall bookcase that covered most of the west wall. The mechanism was not elaborate. A simple push at the right point and the case swung out on a pivot, but it was solid and quiet and left no visible gap. If you pushed the books themselves, they didn't move. It was the frame you pushed, at the exact mid-point of the third shelf from the bottom, where a small brass fitting had been set flush into the painted wood. William had tested the mechanism many times in the early years, coming back to check that it looked right after the paint had settled and the bookcase had acquired its layer of lived-in dust. It still looked right.

The stairs behind were proper stairs, not a ladder, lit by a motion-sensor light that came on as he descended. Sixteen steps, with a rail on the left side. At the bottom, a door with a latch, and then the room.

The room was large. That was the first thing anyone would have noticed, had anyone ever been there. The scale of it, the ceiling height of nearly nine feet, the way the space opened out from the stair door into something you didn't expect underground. William had told the builder he wanted a home cinema and music studio, that he needed proper acoustic insulation and climate control, and the

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builder had built accordingly without blinking. The ventilation ran up through a series of narrow ducts that emerged, invisibly, in the garden behind a bed of ferns. The room was warm in winter and cool in summer. It held no dampness. It smelled of clean cotton and a faint trace of talcum powder, and something underneath that, something simply warm.

In the middle of the room's longest wall, the north wall, directly ahead as you came through the door, stood the nappy change table. It was a proper nursery change table, wide and deep, with sides to prevent rolling, padded in white vinyl with a waterproof mat over the top. Most importantly, it was sized for an adult while replicating a baby change table at the same time. The shelf beneath was well-stocked with packages of disposable nappies stacked on the left in two sizes, fold-flat cloth nappies in a neat pile in the centre, and several pairs of plastic pants in white and pastel colours draped over a small wooden towel rail on the right. Two tins of baby powder, one opened and one sealed in reserve. A bottle of oil. A dispenser of wipes, the heated kind that kept them at a reasonable temperature. Cotton wool rounds in a glass jar with a lid. Everything in its place, and the whole arrangement carrying that quality that belongs to spaces that are properly used, not immaculate and untouched, but cared for, functional, worn in at the right places.

The east end of the room, to the right as you came in, was the blue end. The crib there was a proper wooden cot with white-painted bars, dressed in fitted sheets of a soft mid-blue with a yellow trim. The quilt inside was pieced in squares of blue, yellow and white, and the cellular blanket folded over the foot end was a blue stripe. Above the cot hung a mobile of toy cars in red, yellow and green, and tiny spaceships in silver and white, all of them shaped with the rounded simplicity of things designed for very young eyes, turning slowly in the air movement from the vents. On the wall behind the cot ran a border of repeating trains and stars at exactly the height that would be interesting to a child lying down. The wardrobe on the east wall

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was full of little onesies in blue and white and pale yellow, some with printed trucks, some plain, some with striped collars; a row of terry cloth rompers with press-stud legs; soft jeans with snap crotches; several pairs of baby socks and booties in blue; three cotton sunhats with chin straps; a drawer of folded t-shirts. On the shelf above the wardrobe stood four or five toy cars in bright primary colours, a wooden push-along shape sorter, a cloth cube with different-textured panels on each face, a yellow rubber duck, and a small plush bear in blue dungarees whose name was not anything fixed, who had simply always been there.

The west end was the pink end. The crib there was identical in structure but dressed entirely differently with white fitted sheets with a small rosebud pattern at the border, a quilt in pale pink with white broderie anglaise trim, and a pink cellular blanket at the foot folded into a neat rectangle. Above it, the mobile held baby animals, a white lamb, a yellow chick, a pale pink pig, all in soft plush, along with silver stars and three small unicorns in white and pale gold that caught the light and scattered it in small points across the wall. The wardrobe on the west wall contained a different world of sundresses in pink and white, some with smocking across the chest, some with Peter Pan collars and satin sashes; three or four nightgowns in cotton and fleece; a row of white onesies with lace edging at the neck and sleeves; white tights in two weights, summer and winter; several pairs of frilly plastic pants in white and pale pink; soft booties with satin bows; three cotton bonnets hanging on hooks on the inside of the door, one plain white, one with a pink satin trim, one with a broderie anglaise frill that matched the quilt. A shelf held a baby doll with a cloth body and vinyl face, soft and weighted to feel like something real when held. There was a lacquered pink music box that played a tune he'd wound so often he couldn't have named it, a set of stacking rings in pastel shades, and a small xylophone with a padded mallet.

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Along the south wall, running between the two worlds, was a low shelf unit that held the overflow of both: additional nappies, a row of picture books with thick cardboard pages, a basket of soft toys that belonged to neither end and both plus a rabbit, a soft elephant in grey, a small stuffed lion with a mane sewn from different-coloured loops of yarn. A nursing chair stood in the south-east corner, broad-seated and well-cushioned, a footstool in front of it, the fabric of both worn to a comfortable softness in the specific places where he sat and rested. On a small round table beside the chair sat a baby monitor in white plastic, used only for its white noise function, which he'd set to the rain cycle, a picture book left face-down at the page he'd stopped at and a sippy cup that lived in the dishwasher upstairs when it wasn't here.

It was, in all its particulars, a well-loved nursery. Not a fantasy assembled from catalogues and never used. It was a place that had been lived in, gently and regularly, over the years. The sheets were clean but slightly soft from washing. The toys had been handled. The books had been read. If you had stood in the middle of the room and not known anything about the man who lived upstairs, you would have thought simply that someone was very happy here. Someone, very, very young.

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Chapter 3

On Thursday evening, after the pub, William came home just after half past seven. He made himself a bowl of pasta. He ate well, cooked properly, as food was one of the things he was quietly serious about and ate it at the kitchen bench with the radio on, not really listening. He cleared up. Before going downstairs, he changed his nappy standing in the kitchen. The thin daytime disposable he wore to work was damp, as it usually was by this hour, and he folded it and put it in the bin and taped on a thicker one, doing it with one hand on the bench for balance, the whole sequence taking under two minutes.

Then he went through the sitting room, pushed the bookcase frame at its precise spot, and went down the stairs.

He stood in the doorway of the nursery for a moment and looked at both ends. This was the ritual of it... the looking, the deciding, the waiting to feel which way he was inclined. Some nights, he knew before he got to the bottom of the stairs. Tonight he stood for a moment and felt his way toward what he needed, the way you feel your way toward a word that won't quite surface.

The blue end felt right.

He went to the east wardrobe and stood looking at the contents with a kind of quiet attention. He chose a white onesie with a pale blue collar and two small yellow stars embroidered on the front pocket, one of his oldest, worn through to a softness that nothing new could match. He chose a pair of blue footed sleeper trousers in soft fleece, a recent purchase, and held them for a moment before laying them on the change table.

He went to the nappy shelf. The cloth nappies were folded flat, and he took two, shaking them open and aligning them on the table in the way he'd learned years ago — the double-nappy fold, proper terry cloth with the right bulk and absorbency for a long night. He took a pair of white plastic pants, plain and softly crinkled, and laid them over the stack.

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He undressed, folding his work clothes over the arm of the nursing chair with the neat orderliness of a man who'd long made peace with the combination of babyhood and adult tidiness. He lay down on the change table. This was the moment that always did something particular to him... The lying down, the shift in perspective that came with it, the ceiling above him, the mobile turning slowly at the east end of the room, the specific feel of the soft lamp on the shelf. Everything up here looked different from what it did when standing and had a different feel of scale. He powdered himself carefully, pinned the cloth nappies with two pins on each side. He was deft at it, had been deft at it for many years, the pins going in cleanly with the small satisfying resistance of good cotton, and pulled the plastic pants up and over, settling them at the waist.

He dressed in the onesie, snapped the poppers at the crotch and pulled the sleeper trousers on. Then he lay still for a moment, just breathing.

Then he got up, went to the nursing chair and sat down.

He spent most of that evening not doing anything very much, which was the point. He held the rubber duck and turned it over in his hands. He read one of the picture books. It was a simple one, about a bear who was looking for something he'd lost and kept not finding it until the last page, when it turned out to have been with him the whole time. He'd read it perhaps two hundred times. He didn't get tired of it. If anything, the familiarity was part of the comfort, the way a favourite song works differently when you've heard it so many times that you can hear your own history inside it. He played, for a while, with the cloth cube from the shelf, the crinkle panel, the mirror panel, and the soft squeaky one, running his fingers over each in turn. He pushed the shape sorter's pieces through their holes without looking, finding the shapes by feel.

At some point, he wet the nappy, and the warmth of it settled around him in a way that was, simply, comfortable. Not exciting, not charged, just comfortable, the right state to be in, in the right place, at

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the right time. Like cold feet warming, like a full stomach after something good. He stayed where he was. The mobile turned above the empty cot. The white noise ran its even rain.

He fell asleep in the nursing chair eventually, which happened sometimes. He woke at two in the morning with a stiff neck and a cot to get into and changed himself methodically and half-asleep, folding the damp cloth nappies and leaving them on the floor for the morning, and crawled into the blue-end cot with the quilt around him. He slept until six.

He woke with the light coming on the ventilation timer, which he'd set years ago to come on gradually from six, and he lay in the cot and looked at the ceiling and the mobile and felt the ordinary weight of himself inside the soaked terry cloth. There was nothing wrong with him. There was nothing remarkable about him, here in this room, in this cot, in this state. He was simply himself, in the most straightforward sense, he knew.

He showered upstairs, dressed for work, and ate breakfast. By eight, he was out the door.

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Chapter 4

The Saturday was his.

He had no plans with anyone. He'd checked the group chat the night before and confirmed it was a nothing weekend, with soccer not until Sunday, and so the Saturday was entirely his own, which happened about once a month, and which he spent in the way he'd developed over years of practice.

He slept late in the blue cot, having gone down Friday night in boy mode again, a second consecutive night being not uncommon, and then he got up and showered and made a proper breakfast, eggs and toast and sliced fruit, and ate it upstairs looking at the garden. The dryer was on with a load of shirts. The radio was on. He ate slowly.

Afterwards, he went back downstairs and stood in the nursery doorway again.

The pink end was bright this morning. He'd spent money on good lighting strips with good bulbs, full spectrum, the kind that approximate daylight without the cold harshness of cheap fluorescent. The light caught the white frills on the crib bedding and made the small unicorns on the mobile glow slightly silver. The rosebud sheets had the quality of something recently washed and dried and put back, which they were. It was, he thought, as he thought most mornings when he stood here deciding, a welcoming room. Both ends were welcoming, in their different ways, but the pink end on a Saturday morning had something particularly still about it.

He went to the west wardrobe.

He chose a white cotton onesie with lace edging at the neck and sleeves, simple and soft, bought from a seamstress online who made such things without commentary and had been making them for him for three years. Over it, he thought, the pale pink sundress with the smocking across the chest, the first one she'd made him, the one he'd worn so often it had reached that particular worn-in state where the fabric had softened and the smocking had settled. He

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pulled out white tights and a pair of soft booties with small satin bows at the ankle and stood holding them for a moment.

He took a thick disposable from the pink-end shelf in nighttime weight, the kind that gave proper absorbency for a long day and carried everything to the change table.

The change was slower on girl days. He wasn't entirely sure why. Possibly because the garments had more to them, the onesies' snaps, the tights, the fussing of the dress over everything. Possibly because girl days had a different feeling from boy days. Not more or less, not better or worse, just different, the way sleeping on your left side is different from your right, and both are fine, and sometimes one is exactly what you need. He powdered carefully, taped the disposable securely, pulled the tights up and smoothed them from ankle to waist, dressed the onesie and snapped it, lowered the sundress over his head and reached back to fasten the three small buttons at the top. The smocking pulled a little across the chest, as it always did. He was a large person, but the fit was generous enough to be comfortable. He settled the skirt.

He stood at the change table and looked at himself in the small mirror on the wall beside it. He was a large baby girl. He had always known this, and it had long ceased to be a complicated fact. He looked like what he was, in the most neutral and accurate sense of that phrase.

He went to the nursing chair and picked up the baby doll from the pink-end shelf. He held it against his chest with one arm and leaned back into the cushion of the chair, and let the morning settle around him. The white noise ran its rain. Outside, somewhere above and beyond the ventilation, the world was doing its Saturday things.

By mid-morning, he was on the floor with the stacking rings, building the tower and toppling it and building it again, sorting the rings into colour groups first and then rebuilding, the whole sequence calming in the way that repetition at a simple task can be calming when you let it be. The music box on the pink-end shelf had

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been wound and was playing its tune, which he'd long since internalised so completely that he heard it the way you hear your own heartbeat... present, unobtrusive, simply part of the arrangement of things. He was, in the plainest sense, content.

He ate lunch upstairs, in his baby clothes, without much self-consciousness. He'd long since gotten past the point where being seen by himself in these clothes felt strange. The kitchen was just the kitchen, and he was just himself, and the sundress was just a sundress.

After lunch, he went back down and slept in the pink cot for an hour. The quilt was exactly right. The unicorn mobile turned above him, its shadows moving on the ceiling in the particular way that had become, over the years, entirely familiar and entirely peaceful.

That afternoon, he played music through a small Bluetooth speaker, a playlist he'd made of gentle, instrumental things, the kind of music that doesn't ask anything of you. He turned the pages of a picture book about a rabbit who planted a garden, and then another about a girl who found a boat and rowed it to an island, and then he put the books down and lay on the floor on his back with his arms out and looked at the ceiling. The disposable was wet and warm and heavy around him, settled against him as if it belonged there, which it did. The music played. The white noise ran beneath it. He was happy. There was no other word for it, and he didn't need one.

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Chapter 5

The bed-wetting had started at nine and hadn't stopped. He didn't remember a time when it wasn't there. The wet sheet in the morning, the particular waking sensation, the management of it that his mother had been, to her credit, quiet and practical about. She'd bought him a mattress protector without ceremony. She'd washed sheets without sighing or making it a conversation. When he was fourteen, and it still hadn't resolved, she'd taken him to the doctor, who had run through the options without particular enthusiasm. Nothing had much helped.

He'd worn training pants for several years, and then pull-ups, and then at sixteen, when it had become clear that this was not a passing phase, a specialist his GP had referred him to had suggested that properly fitted nappies at night might simply be more practical and better for his sleep. His mother had agreed with matter-of-fact good sense, and they'd not made a production of it. He'd been wearing nappies at night since sixteen, and what had happened over the following months, what had crept up gradually and then settled into certainty, was that he'd found himself wanting to wear them in the daytime too.

Not for the same reason. Or not only. The daytime bladder weakness was partly real and partly chosen, and he'd spent considerable time in his late teens trying to clearly separate the two and had eventually decided this was not a useful project. The distinction mattered less than the fact. He was continent enough for soccer, for the meeting, for the situations where ordinary function was required of him. He chose, in every other context, not to exercise it. This was not a failure. It was a preference, as deep and as simple as any other preference he had.

At twenty, he'd managed his first overnight with friends, a camping trip, two nights wearing a pull-up and camping near the facilities and waking at three to change. He'd done it twice more after that and then quietly stopped volunteering for overnight plans. The

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cost-benefit didn't work out. The concentration required, the management, the careful geography of every dark morning was exhausting in a way that nothing about his home life ever was. Home was better. Home was, in every sense, where he was.

What he'd come to understand, slowly and without dramatic revelation, was that the whole complex of it, the nappies, the nursery, the two ages of himself that weren't separate selves but more like two keys that the same piece of music could be played in, was not a disorder or a problem. It was what he was. The nursery was the truest room in his house. The adult bedroom upstairs, with its proper bed he barely slept in and its sensible furniture, was the set dressing of the ordinary life he also genuinely lived. Both were real. That was the thing he'd needed to understand and had understood.

He'd never told anyone. He'd come close twice, once at twenty-two with a woman he'd almost loved, who had a nature of unconditionality about her that made him think she might handle it well, and he'd opened his mouth one evening while they were sitting on his kitchen floor drinking wine and had not done it. And once online, on a forum where people like him gathered and were careful and kind to one another, he'd written a long post about his life and deleted it before posting. Both times, the fear had been specific. It was not discovery, not judgment exactly, but something more intimate. The risk of being seen and then misunderstood. Of being interpreted rather than known.

So he lived as he lived. It was, by any honest measure, a good life.

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Chapter 6

The dryer gave out on a Tuesday afternoon. He'd come home from work to find it had stopped mid-cycle and wouldn't restart. He pressed the button, tried the reset, checked the fuse, all the ordinary things, and the load inside was damp and cooling. He pulled everything out and draped it over the clothes rail in the utility room and looked at it.

It was the nursery wash. He did it once a week, sometimes twice. The cloth nappies, which he washed at ninety degrees, a few pairs of plastic pants, and whichever outfits had been worn that week. This week, there were the white onesie with the yellow stars from Thursday, the blue sleeper trousers, and two pairs of plastic pants. The pink sundress, which he'd worn again on Sunday afternoon, was also in the load, slightly crumpled on the rail in the way smocked fabric goes when it dries wrong.

The clothes airer he had was small, a two-tier folding rack that handled socks and underwear, and would not fit this load. He could leave everything until the dryer was fixed, but a replacement part would take at least three days to arrive, and damp clothing left too long was not worth salvaging.

He stood in the utility room and thought about it with the particular focus he brought to problems that needed a practical solution, regardless of what else they involved.

The washing line was in the back garden. It was a proper line on two solid posts, and he'd never used it. He'd used the dryer for everything since moving in, which his grandmother would have found inexplicable and wasteful and possibly morally suspect. The line was still there, slightly weathered at the posts, perfectly functional. He'd checked it once, in the first year, and found it sound.

He stood and thought about the washing line for a while.

The back garden was small and walled on three sides with brick on the north, rendered concrete on the east, and a six-foot timber fence on the south separating his garden from the

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neighbour's. Two old rose bushes on her side had grown up to and slightly over the fence, their uppermost canes visible from where he stood at his kitchen window. He'd seen the neighbour out there once or twice, a woman about his age, dark-haired, quiet, not unfriendly but not forthcoming, the kind of neighbour who nods once and goes back inside. She'd seemed entirely uninterested in him, which he'd found quietly convenient. A lot of women gave him a second or third glance. She, however, didn't even really give him a first look.

He looked at the fence again. Six feet was six feet. She'd have to be standing on something to see over it.

He went back to the utility room and looked at the washing for a while longer.

The thing was, the practical and obvious thing, the thing a person of ordinary good sense would simply do, was hang the washing on the line. The cloth nappies were cloth nappies. Plenty of people used cloth nappies on babies and toddlers and hung them on lines, and nobody looked twice. The plastic pants were more specific but still within the range of ordinary infant care. The onesie and the sleeper trousers were children's clothing of no particular note.

It was the dress that made him hesitate. The pink sundress with the smocking, small and clearly well-made, clearly not an infant's dress. The frilly plastic pants. He looked at each in turn.

Then he picked up the laundry basket, loaded everything into it and carried it into the garden.

He worked methodically, pegging the cloth nappies first, six of them, white, wide, hanging flat in the late afternoon light. He pegged the plastic pants beside them. There were four pairs, two white and two pale pink. He pegged the blue sleeper trousers and the white onesie with the stars. He took the pink dress out of the basket last and shook it gently, so the smocking didn't crease further and found a spot for it at the end of the line.

He stepped back and looked at what he'd done.

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It was washing on a line. It was his washing on his line in his garden on a Tuesday evening. He went back inside and put the kettle on.

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Chapter 7

Across the fence, in the garden next door, a woman named Lena was doing something she'd been doing more often lately. She was sitting in the wooden chair she'd dragged to the sunny corner by the south wall, doing nothing in particular, in the way she'd allowed herself to do more of since she'd decided to stop apologising for it.

She was twenty-five and had lived in this house for two years and still wasn't entirely sure if it suited her, this suburb, this street. Her job was in data analysis, done mostly from home, and her social life was adequate. Her friends were good but not many, and her days were regular. She'd been in a relationship until eighteen months ago that had ended badly, which had left her more solitary than she might have chosen had she been given the choice in advance. She had made, gradually, a reasonable peace with the solitude. It was better than the alternative, which was performing normalcy for someone.

She was wearing, under her jeans, a disposable nappy. She had been wearing one in the daytime since before she moved to this house. The nighttime nappies went even further back than that.

It was not something she thought about constantly. It was more than it was simply part of how she arranged her days, the way certain people are particular about their tea, or the arrangement of their shelves. She wore nappies as she also read before sleeping and kept her computer cables tidy. It was a preference and a comfort and, in its way, a necessity. She had a continence issue, a genuine one, documented, though the diagnosis had always felt somewhat beside the point. She'd worn nappies before the diagnosis and would have worn them without it. They were hers.

She kept it, as people keep such things, entirely private. No partner had ever known. She was methodical about it with disposables at home and when she was out, bought online, stored in a lockable cupboard because old habits of careful concealment are hard to shed even when you live alone. She had shared online, in a community that was careful and kind, as such communities tend to

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be, but had never spoken to anyone in person about it, not once. She had considered it and turned away from the consideration more times than she could count.

Her neighbour, she'd registered as: tall, seems pleasant enough, clearly not interested in conversation. She'd returned his nods and looked the other way. She'd noticed he had no girlfriend in the peripheral way you notice things about the person whose living room shares a wall with your own, and had thought nothing particular about it. Once she'd heard him laughing on the phone and thought, *That's a nice laugh*. Then she'd gone back to whatever she'd been doing. But after the humiliating disaster of a relationship that soured because she wore nappies, she was not interested in any other man.

She was sitting in the wooden chair with a cup of tea she'd stopped drinking when it went cold, looking at nothing in particular, when the sounds from the other side of the fence started. She didn't look up immediately. The sound of someone pegging out washing was the most ordinary domestic sound there was; she recognised it and went back to not thinking about anything.

She went inside to make fresh tea, and it was when she came back, passing the spare bedroom on the way from the kitchen, glancing out of habit through the window that looked down into both gardens, that she saw the line.

She stopped.

The cloth nappies first. They were white, flat, wide, hanging in a row and clearly for adults. Four pairs of plastic pants beside them, also adult size. Children's clothing, a onesie, a small pair of footed trousers, also in adult size. And at the end of the line, turning slightly in the evening breeze, hung a small pink dress with smocking across the chest.

She stood at the window and looked at the line for a long time.

She knew what she was looking at. She knew it with the complete and immediate certainty of recognition, the way you

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recognise a piece of music you heard once in childhood before you can say what it is. She knew the scale of the nappies and the plastic pants, the width, the particular drape of terry cloth sized for someone of real height, someone adult. She knew because she knew. She knew in the way that living closely with something for years makes you fluent in its visible language.

She knew also, with a completeness that took her breath slightly, that she was looking at something that had been hidden, that had perhaps never been on a washing line before, that was out here now for some ordinary practical reason and not because the person who owned these things had chosen, today, to stop hiding. And the baby clothing resonated with her in an unexpected way as well.

She stood at the window for another minute.

She had hung her own washing on the line once, in her last flat, on a day when her dryer had broken, and the practical logic had been identical. She had hung nappies and plastic pants and stood shaking in the kitchen for half an hour before she'd gone back out and taken everything down and draped it over the bath instead. The shaking had been from something that was part fear and part... she'd been unable to name the other part. Relief, possibly. The relief of something existing in the daylight, even briefly.

She looked at the pink dress. She looked at the row of nappies.

She put her mug down on the windowsill and stood very still and waited to know what she thought about this. It came, slowly, as something warm. A door she hadn't known was there, simply visible now: present, unlocked, not requiring anything of her except to notice it.

She went back downstairs.

She stood in her kitchen and looked at herself briefly in the side of the kettle, which was a poor mirror but a mirror nonetheless, the ordinary young woman she appeared to be, her ordinary jeans, the ordinary things you could not see. She thought about two years of nods over fences and looking away. She thought about her locked

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cupboard and her careful habits and the extraordinary coincidence, or the thing that was not quite a coincidence, that was perhaps simply the universe being occasionally practical, of a shared fence with a person who had just pegged out a washing line that could only mean one thing.

She put one hand against the waistband of her jeans, briefly, feeling the familiar give of the disposable through the denim, the warmth of it, the soft bulk, the tapes, and made a decision of the kind that only becomes possible when something impossible for a long time becomes, in a moment, simply not impossible any more.

She went out of her front door.

She walked to the house next door, stood on the step and knocked.

She heard, inside, the ordinary sounds of a person in a kitchen, a chair, a step, the small hesitation before the latch. Then the door opened, and William Thomson stood there looking at her, tall and broad-shouldered in his work clothes, with an expression of mild polite surprise that she recognised immediately as the expression of someone very practised at appearing straightforward.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Lena. From next door. I don't think we've really spoken."

He smiled. His eyes, she noticed, had something careful in them, something watchful and a little tired and, she thought, something else she couldn't quite read yet.

"No," he said. "I don't think we have. I'm Will."

She looked at him. He looked at her. Outside, behind them both, behind two fences and two small gardens, the washing turned quietly in the evening air.

"I was going to ask," she said, "if you wanted to come over for a cup of tea."

And something shifted in his face, behind the careful eyes. Something that had been held a long way back came forward, just slightly, tentative and wondering, and she saw it.

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"Yes," he said. "I'd like that."

— End —