

# The Doorbell

by Oliver Clarke,

Published: 2012



It started as a bit of a joke.

She was going to bed one night when she looked up at the bell that hung on the wall high up to the right of the front door. The main light was off and the hallway was lit only by the glow of the TV her boyfriend was watching in the living room. The dimness made the tiny red light stand out more. The tiny red light staring down at her from box on the wall.

It seemed...wrong. Was it normally on? She didn't think so. She thought it only lit up when someone pressed that button outside and the doorbell rang. A visual cue to go along with the sound. A bit pointless really because you'd have to be looking at it to see it and when would you stand there staring at the doorbell waiting for it to ring?

She was sure it wasn't always lit though, because if it was, why was she noticing it now. It was creepy that red light, threatening somehow. Red was the

colour of danger wasn't it? The colour of stop signs and warnings. She turned round and walked back to the living room.

„Come and look at this,“ she said. Her boyfriend sighed from the sofa.

„Look at what?“

„The doorbell.“

„What?“

„The light on it is on. It's not normally on is it?“ She was sure it wasn't but she wanted his reassurance that she wasn't going crazy.

He didn't get up. „Don't be bloody daft. It probably just means that the batteries are running down. I'll change them tomorrow. Now let me watch the telly.“

She opened her mouth to say something back but couldn't think of anything. What he said made perfect sense. So she kissed him goodnight and walked back out into the hallway again. Just as she was leaving the room he laughed and said, „Either that or something is constantly ringing the bell and we just can't hear it.“ He put on a corny Bela Lugosi accent, „Something trying to get through from the other side...“

That was the start of the joke. She laughed back. „Batteries tomorrow, don't fucking forget.“

She looked up at it as she walked back through the hallway to the stairs. The thing on the wall...what did you call it? Not a doorbell because wasn't that the bit on the outside of the house? Besides, it wasn't a bell at all, not anymore. It would have been when she was a kid, a proper bell that got struck somehow and chimed. Now though it was a little speaker with circuit boards and wires inside it that received a wireless signal when the button on the outside of the house was pressed. All very clever but lacking in soul somehow. There was something so simple and pure about a proper bell.

She looked up at the box on the wall again, feeling nostalgic. The box stared back at her with its one red eye. She knew in her head that it was an inanimate object. Just another collection of plastic and wiring that performed a simple task that made her life easier. In that moment though it felt like maybe it wasn't soulless at all. It felt as if it had a mind all of its own, a mind and a particularly malevolent soul that wished her no good at all.

She shook her head and yawned, god she must be tired to be thinking up this nonsense. Bed now for sure, and a stern telling off for him on the sofa if he didn't sort out the batteries tomorrow.

When she walked downstairs for breakfast the next day the light was still on. She'd forgotten about it overnight but as soon as she was halfway down the staircase there it was again. That vivid red light glaring at her. She shivered involuntarily, as if a freezing raindrop had fallen down the back of her blouse. It was stupid, she told herself, just an indicator that the batteries needed changing just as he had told her last night. Nothing more than that. Had they had to choose such a vivid red for it though, couldn't they have gone with a nice pale orange? She imagined the designers in some sterile lab somewhere in Germany or Japan, earnestly discussing what colour to use until one of them piped up with „Let's just make it a colour that will really shit people up.“

She chuckled at the thought and started to feel a bit better.

Thinking about it logically, she decided, if the purpose of the light was to warn that the batteries were low then it might be worth testing the bell to see if it worked. He obviously hadn't changed the batteries yet and hadn't really expected him too. It would have been far to sensible and efficient for him to actually do something when asked rather than waiting to be reminded.

He started work an hour later than her and was still in bed snoring so she supposed she ought to wait until the evening to test the bell. Fuck it though, he could sleep through anything. She opened the door with her keys, leaned out into the chilly March morning, and pressed the doorbell. It rang. The slightly staticy double bong that had been the least offensive of the five different tones the bell had come programmed with. She wondered if that same group of serious designers had deliberately made all but one of the tones utterly horrible, giving people the illusion they had a choice whereas in reality there was only one option that wouldn't drive any normal person insane.

She heard a noise from upstairs as he stirred and rolled over in bed, then quiet again. She was almost tempted to give the button another push but decided against it. At least with him in bed she could have her breakfast in peace.

It was a Friday and he was out at the pub with his mates that night so she picked herself up a ready meal and a bottle of wine from the convenience store near her work. The house was freezing when she got in, so she ran straight through to the living room and whacked the thermostat up before walking through to the kitchen and putting her purchase in the fridge. When she walked back into the hallway to hang her coat up she saw that the red light was, of course, still glowing at her.

„Oh for fuck's sake,“ she said out loud. „Was it really too much trouble for you to do it before work?“

She hung her coat up and then walked to the door and reached up to lift the box down. Straining up on tiptoes her fingers brushed the bottom of it, her long manicured nails scraping over the white plastic, but she couldn't get a grip on it.

„Useless fucking twat,“ she muttered and walked through to the living room to grab the foot stool, the same one he propped his feet up on every night while he watched TV and drank beer and occasionally grunted at her.

She positioned it on the floor beneath the box, kicked off her heels and stepped up on to the worn leather. The stool gave her the extra height she needed to easily reach the box. She grasped it and lifted it off the screw it was hanging on then stepped back off the foot stool. It shifted slightly as she did, the leather pillow she was standing on slipping on the wood it rested on. Her left foot shot forward and hit the wall, big toe squashing up against the wallpaper. She felt herself tipping backwards, that horrible sickening sensation that comes when you know your going to fall and that you can't do anything about it. Her arms flailed in the air, struggling to gain purchase on something but there was nothing to grab, just the flat plain wall. Her right foot went down hard on the floor, jarring her ankle and sending a bolt of pain up her leg to her groin. She stumbled backwards and slammed in to the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. The flesh covering the bones of her spine squashed painfully against the hard wood and she grunted in pain, the wind knocked out of her.

In her hand the red light stared up at her. She sucked in a deep breath. „You can fucking shut up too.“

Back in the kitchen she poured herself a glass of wine and took a long sip of it. The box she'd placed on the work top above the fridge, face down so she didn't have the light staring at her. The crimson glow was still visible though, leaking out slightly around the edges of the box as it sat there, like blood puddling out from a wound.

Her back wasn't hurt badly but it was definitely sore. Her ankle on the other hand was throbbing and feeling like it might get worse rather than better as the night went on. She grabbed a couple of paracetamol from the cupboard and knocked them back with another swallow of wine. The alcohol gave her a slight buzz and she began to relax a little. All she needed to do was get the bloody batteries changed and she could relax and enjoy an evening where she got to watch what she wanted on the telly.

The back of the box had one of those small sliding doors over the batteries. She slid it open to reveal a couple of AAs. They were of the ultra cheap kind with wacky brand names that always seemed to come with new appliances. In this case they were called »Golden Power« and had obviously been in there since they'd bought the bell a couple of years ago. Not bad, she guessed, although it wasn't like they had many visitors to ring the bell.

She got a nail in between the two batteries and levered them out. The red light stayed lit for a couple of seconds then winked out. She exhaled. She knew it was stupid but she couldn't help feel relieved.

She'd already grabbed a pack of fresh batteries from the kitchen drawer, Duracell this time, none of your cheap shit. These bastards would last for years before that red light had an excuse to come on again.

She slipped them in and turned the box over. The light was still off.

Four hours later the wine was all gone and Emma was feeling like bed. He was still out and based on past experience he would be for a while longer. She switched off the TV and stood on slightly shakey legs. Her ankle was still sore despite the fact that she'd had it up on the treacherous foot stool all evening. The wine had numbed the pain a little but, even tipsy as she was, she knew she needed to walk carefully on it. She picked up her wine glass and started hobbling towards the kitchen. With the television off the house was nearly silent, just the occasional low whoosh of cars coming from the road outside. The quiet was relaxing and she wondered why, other than force of habit, she'd turned the TV on rather than reading and enjoying the peace of an empty house.

And then the doorbell rang.

The noise cut through the tranquility of the night and temporarily shocked Emma into complete sobriety. The warm feeling of the wine fell away and left only a sickness in the pit of her stomach.

Two things about it alarmed her. Firstly the fact that it was ringing at all. It was nearly ten to eleven at night and even if it was her boyfriend (and it was too early to be him) he'd have his keys. Secondly the fact that the sound wasn't the usual bong. Instead it was long loud buzz, more like a warning siren than a door bell. She shook her head to clear the white wine fuzz. Changing the batteries had

obviously reset the bell to this horrific, ear stabbing default. It was probably just the useless twat ringing it, too lazy or drunk to be bothered to find his keys.

She leaned into the kitchen and placed her glass on the side and then walked as quickly as she could towards the front door. As she approached it she realised something was amiss, through the frosted glass of the door she could see nothing. There was no-one out there, or if there was they were either very short or standing to one side. She giggled drunkenly at that, the odd combination of irritation and unease that she'd been feeling dissipating. It was either some teenager pissing about or an electronic glitch. Still, she couldn't not open the door could she? You had to open the door when someone rang the bell...

She looked up at it then, at the box on the wall. The light was on again. Glowing angrily down at her, taunting her, urging her to open the door.

„Fuck off,“ she said. Opening the door late at night when there appeared to be no-one there probably wasn't a good plan. What if it wasn't a kid? What if it was a burglar or a rapist hiding out there? Shit. For the first time that evening she wished her boyfriend was there. She approached the door, stopping about three feet from it and cleared her throat. „Who's there?“ she said, trying to sound confident and sober rather than nervous and drunk.

From the other side of the door came only silence.

She took a step forward and called again. „Hello?“

Still nothing. It must have been a kid, she told herself, some spotty teenager off their face on alcopops or weed. Ringing the bell and then fucking off into the night to set fire to a bin or some shit.

„Last chance.“ She said, feeling that confidence she'd been searching for earlier and hearing it in her own voice.

And then there was someone there. A large, dark shape filling the frosted glass panel, silhouetted against the soft glow of streetlights. She gasped involuntarily and took a step backwards. Up on the wall the single red eye stared down at her, watched her slowly stepping backwards towards the stairs. Through the glass she saw the figure raise a hand. Then she heard the sound of a key in the lock.

The door swang open, banging against the wall and her boyfriend staggered in.

„Out the way, need a piss,“ he said as he pushed past her and ran up the stairs. She heard a loud splashing and a sigh of relief as he urinated. She felt the tension flood out of her, replaced by irritation.

„Fuck's sake,“ she said and slammed the door. „Why did you ring the sodding bell? You shat me right up.“

He grunted something back that she couldn't hear and wandered off to the bedroom. By the time she got upstairs he was asleep.

They ate breakfast together the next morning, a weekend habit. Bacon sandwiches and tea on the sofa while they watched one of the shows they'd Sky plussed during the week.

„I changed the batteries in the doorbell,“ she said as he skipped through an ad break, „but the sound its making is fucking awful. Can you look at it?“

He did, pretty much straight away for a change. She stood beside him as he flicked the little switches on the back of the bell. No matter which way he switched them though the sound that was emitted when the button was pressed was that same horrible buzz she'd heard the night before. The red light was still on too.

Glowing nastily. Taunting them for not being able to change the noise the bell made.

„Sorry love,“ he said, „I can't figure it out. Fuck knows where the manual is. In the bin long ago probably.“

Emma pictured the white coated designers again. Earnestly working to create an interface that was so counter-intuitive it was impossible for a normal human to operate without written instructions. She'd imagined them as German or Japanese and decided that they must all be scientists who'd worked on fiendish weapons and experiments during the war. Was that racist she wondered? Probably. And the ones from the war were all dead now anyway. Not making fucking doorbells.

His willingness to help that morning, even if he didn't actually manage to, put her in a good mood and they had an enjoyable day together. A bit of shopping in town, a pub lunch, a few more drinks in another bar on the way home. They even managed to pick a movie from the Video Rental place at the end of the street without arguing. Watching the movie with his arm around her she felt unusually at peace. Relaxed and happy and with no thoughts of doorbells or white coated men. When he leaned over and kissed her after the movie finished she found herself eagerly responding. With a twinkle in his eye he suggested an early night and she followed him upstairs without giving the thing on the wall a second glance.

Sex was the one thing he was good at, very good, definitely always an early entry in the list of pros and cons she mentally made about their relationship every so often. He was in her when it happened. Fucking her from behind as she played with herself. She was nearly there, almost, so close... Then the bell rang.

The harsh noise cut through her head, killing her mood instantly. She realised that she was afraid, her unease from the previous night fluttering in her chest.

„Shit,“ she said. Then: „Stop it,“ when she realised he was still fucking her.

„Why? It's just a kid, forget it.“

„Fucking stop it now.“

„Okay, okay, Jesus.“ He pulled out of her and stood. „What do you want me to do?“

„Answer it for fuck's sake, what do you think?“

She looked at the clock radio by the bed, the glowing green numbers told her it as 22:48. It had been about the same time the previous night hadn't it?

„Did you ring the bell yesterday? When you got home?“

He shook his head. „I just let myself in. Why would I ring the bell?“

He picked up his jeans from the floor and pulled them on.

„Where are you going?“

„To answer the fucking door! You just told me to!“

He walked to the top of the stairs and she watched him step down the first couple. He stopped there, peering forward and she realised he was trying to see if there was anyone standing at the door.

She ran to the window and opened the curtains slightly, holding one in front of her as she strained forward to try and see the front step. From what she could see there was no-one there but the angle meant she couldn't quite see all of it. Could a figure be hiding there, tucked in close to the house so she couldn't see? Possibly, she thought.

And then he called from the stairs.

„There’s nobody there. I told you, it’s just a kid pissing about.“

She kept watching from the window until he was back in the room. He walked up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder.

„What’s got you so spooked?“

„Nothing. You’re right, probably just a kid.“

It happened again the next night at the same time. The terrible buzzing. They were downstairs this time. Watching the end of a movie before bed. As soon as she heard it she looked at her watch and then at her phone because she knew the time on that was spot on. 10:48. Again. Why that time? Did it mean anything to whoever was doing this.

He looked at her without saying anything. A look of concern on his face.

She nodded. „It’s exactly the same time as it was yesterday. And the night before when you were out. It rang that night just before you got home.“

He walked to the window and raised the blind, pushing his cheek up against the glass so he could see the front step.

„There’s no-one there...“

She stood and ran to the hallway, looking out into it and at the front door. There was no-one there. All that was visible through the obscured glass was blurred detail of the houses on the opposite side of the street.

She turned back, facing him across the lounge.

„Could someone have rung the bell and got away that quickly? Without us seeing them?“

„I don’t know. Maybe.“ He shrugged. „Maybe the bell is just faulty. I’ll get a new one after work tomorrow. They’re only cheap.“

He did, arriving home the next day not long after her with an Argos carrier bag dangling from one hand. He took the old bell down from the wall, pulled the batteries out and threw it in the kitchen bin. The pusher came off the outside of the house and that went in the bin too.

Within five minutes the new bell was up and working. There was no red light and when he pushed the button the sound that filled the house was a gentle, traditional bing bong.

„Sorted,“ he said. „If it was the bell anyway. And I’ll keep an eye out tonight in case it was some kid. Either way no more frigging buzzing.“

At 10:30 he went upstairs and stood in the dark by the bedroom window. Emma sat on a dining chair in the kitchen with a clear view of the front door.

She played a game on her phone as she waited, her eyes flicking every so often to the clock at the top of the screen. At 10:45 she stopped, put the phone on the kitchen surface next to her and stared at the front door. Her eyes were fixed on it, trying to stare through the patterned glass, to see clearly what was beyond it.

She sat and waited, feeling simultaneously idiotic and frightened. Could it really have been a fault with the old bell? Could some glitch cause it to ring at the same time ever night? She supposed it was possible but it seemed unlikely. That left the possibility that someone was doing this deliberately, trying to annoy or scare them for some reason. Why would anyone do that? Maybe that was the wrong question. People did things because they could. There was probably a Facebook group or

something. Random strangers taking it in turns to ring their doorbell and then laugh about it online.

The doorbell rang. The house was filled with that horrific buzzing, louder than ever and she realised with a start that it was coming from two places. Not just from the new bell by the door but also from the kitchen bin. That wasn't possible, she told herself, but her ears told her it was happening. Then it was over, the sound cut off as suddenly as it had started. Silence descended, although she could still hear the buzzing in her mind.

She stood to approach the door and then heard the sound of her boyfriend's footsteps as he charged down the stairs.

„There was no-one there,“ he said. „There was no-one fucking there.“

She had been staring right at the door when the bells rang and had seen nothing.

„I know. It's impossible but I know.“

He walked from the foot of the stairs to the door and reached a hand forward to open it. She panicked, the fear and unease she'd been feeling was replaced in a flash with genuine terror. She couldn't let him open that door. Not now, not so soon after the bell had rung. She knew she was being stupid and superstitious, that there must still be some logical explanation for what was happening. Right now though she was too tired and upset to care. All she wanted to do was go upstairs with him and hide under the duvet.

„Stop,“ she said. „We know there's no one there. Don't go out.“

She thought back to her earlier idea that this might be some kind of co-ordinated prank. Like-minded dickheads connecting online...

„That's it,“ she said. „I bet that's it. The bell is wireless isn't it? I bet some twat out there has got a gadget that allows them to ring it.“

He shrugged, „Hey, you might be onto something there. Either way I'm taking this one down.“ He reached up and pulled the box down from the wall. That done he carried it through to the kitchen, sliding the back compartment open as he did so and pulling the batteries out. She watched him put it on the kitchen surface and remembered him doing the same thing with the old bell the night before. He'd taken the batteries out of it hadn't he? In fact the batteries in his hand now were probably the ones from the old bell. And yet she had heard it ring, she was sure of it, heard it buzz away from inside the bin. How was that possible? Could it have had some residue of power in its circuits? That must be it...

He was wandering back into the front room, switching the TV on. Her explanation had obviously resolved things in his mind and that made her feel better too. She poured herself a glass of wine and joined him.

They finished the bottle between them and opened another, getting a fair way through that. It was Sunday and she had work the next day but she needed the relief that alcohol gave her.

When they went upstairs she fell asleep instantly. While she slept she dreamt, a terrible nightmare that she woke from with a scream. In her dream she didn't stop him from opening the door. Instead she watched in silence as he twisted the lock and pulled it open. He stood there staring out onto the street, still and quiet until he said at last, „There's nothing there. Nothing.“



Then he turned slowly to face her. Except he couldn't face her because for some reason he had no face. Where once had been the eyes that had bewitched her when they first met and the mouth she had kissed so many times there was now nothing. He had no features. No eyebrows, no cheek bones, no nose. His face was covered in pale flesh, like a sheet of skin coloured cling film stretched across it. He walked towards her and spoke again. His voice was low and heavy and it seemed to come from within him without the need to come out of his mouth. She knew it was vitally important that she heard what he was saying, that he was explaining what was happening and why. All she heard though was noise, a nonsensical, guttural rumbling that told her nothing.

„I can't understand you,“ she heard herself screaming. And then she woke up, screaming for real.

Her hangover was bad, her eyes gritty and tired and her stomach churning a little from the wine. She'd gone to bed feeling more positive, convinced that by taking the new bell down as well they would thwart whoever was doing this. The dream disturbed her though, made her think that whatever was happening wasn't something as everyday as some stupid internet prank. She knew it was only a dream but it had tapped in to the disquiet she was trying to keep pushed down inside.

It was her first day in the office since it had all started, though, and being out of the house helped. The change of environment and the company of her colleagues distracted and relaxed her a little. She wondered if she should talk to anyone about what had happened, what was happening, but decided they'd think she was nuts. Besides, while she got on okay with most of the people in the office she didn't trust any of them enough to have that personal a conversation with any of them.

When she got home he was there already. A bottle of wine and two glasses were sitting on the table along with plates and cutlery. The centrepiece was brown paper bag which contained, judging by the aromas filling the room, a takeaway curry. He walked into the room wearing her favourite shirt, his face slightly pink from just having shaved.

„Wow,“ she said and gestured vaguely around the room, not sure what to say. „Thanks.“

„I thought we could do with a proper evening together. Talking rather than just watching the telly. Last night was weird, but let's be honest, things haven't been quite right between us for a while. So let's talk about it.“

They did. And it was good. They both talked at length, with an nicety that had been missing from their relationship for a while, about how they felt and what they wanted. He told her the things that bugged him about her and she did the same. They laughed a few times, and smiled a few more, but mostly they just talked and at the end of it she felt happier than she had in months.

She didn't tell him the old doorbell had rung though. And she didn't tell him about the dream.

They went to bed at ten, not for sex but because she was exhausted. They cuddled though and she was just dozing off with his arms around her when the doorbell went. She sat bolt upright, aware that he had done the same beside her. The clock read 10:48. She ran to the window and jerked the curtains open, not

worried now about the neighbours seeing her nudity. She could see the doorstep, all but a fraction of it, and it was empty. He ran to the stairs and she heard him thundering down them. She followed, running into the kitchen in time to see him pulling the rolling pin from a drawer. With a furious roar he brought it down on the doorbell that was sitting there from the previous evening. The white plastic fractured, revealing the circuitry inside he brought the heavy wooden pin down and again and again, bits of plastic and wiring flying off the side and onto the floor. He stopped, his face flushed, eyes still sparkling with rage, and let out a long ragged sigh.

„Fucking thing won't ring now.“

„This one too,“ she said and lifted the empty foil trays the curry had come in out of the bin, revealing the old bell below. He reached in and pulled it out, placing it on the kitchen side and smashing it too. He was calmer this time, slower and more methodical, but at the end it was just as destroyed as the other bell had been. Together they put all the pieces in a carrier bag which he then put by the front door.

„I'll get rid of it tomorrow,“ he said, „somewhere away from here.“

She dreamt again that night and wasn't surprised that she did. The dream was a continuation of the previous one. „Tell me who you are,“ she was screaming at the faceless figure. „Tell me what you want.“

She watched with horrified fascination as it raised both of its hands and dug them into the blank flesh where its mouth should have been. The skin yielded and tore like warm wax, allowing the figure to shape a crude hole there. It spoke again, badly formed words tumbling out of the ragged space where its mouth should have been, and this time she understood every word.

She wasn't screaming when she woke up this time but she was drenched in sweat. The image faceless thing with its roughly formed mouth was burned into her brain. She knew it had spoken to her but she had no idea what it had said. No matter how hard she tried the words wouldn't come back to her.

Her boyfriend was still asleep so she snuck out of the bed and went and sat on the toilet. She cried as she peed. She had gone to bed thinking it was over. She knew now that it wasn't.

They ate together in silence that evening and then sat in front of the television drinking. By some unspoken mutual agreement they went to bed at ten, both of them drunk by that point. It must stop tonight, she thought, there's no bells to ring. That was the thought in her head when she fell asleep. And there were no bells that night. Instead at 10:48 there echoed through the house a frenzied and terrible banging, the sound of large heavy fists pounding on the front door. He was out of the bed in a flash, up and running for the stairs in his boxer shorts.

„No!“ she shouted and staggered out of bed, her legs shaky from too much wine. The banging had stopped and she reached the bedroom door in time to hear him open front door.

„No,“ she shouted again, „for fuck's sake no,“ and she ran on. She reached the top of the stairs just in time to see the front door swing shut. He wasn't there. Her boyfriend was gone.

She ran down the stairs, tore the door open and stepped naked out into the bitter March night shouting his name.

By the time the police arrived she had stopped crying. Her eyes were sore and her throat ached, her voice coming in a rasp when she spoke to them.

There were two of them, a man and a woman. She'd nearly jumped out of her skin when the man banged loudly on the door. He apologised when she let them in, explaining that they'd tried the bell but had received no response. The pusher, she realised, the pusher was still out there, it just wasn't connected to anything anymore.

She told them he was gone and they tried to calm her down and reassure her. People went walkabout all the time, the female PC said, especially when they'd been drinking.

„He was in his pants? You think he ran away in his fucking pants?“ she said. They looked at her warily, explaining that adults weren't even considered to be missing for the first 48 hours. She tried to tell them about the doorbell but even as she spoke she could tell how crazy it sounded. The ramblings of a drunk. They probably thought he'd had a lucky escape. Run away from a lunatic pisshead girlfriend.

They left after half an hour. Leaving her with a cup of tea and the silence of the empty house. She didn't sleep again that night, she couldn't, and so she didn't dream.

Her boss sounded sympathetic when she spoke to him to say she wouldn't be in. She told him her boyfriend had disappeared, that the police were investigating, maybe if she said it enough it would be true. The house was so quiet without him, quieter than it had seemed in the past when he wasn't there. He wasn't just not there, he was nowhere. She watched the News 24 all day, somehow expecting there to be a story about him, or at least something that her mind could connect to the things she'd experienced recently. There was nothing, just the same repeated news of horrible things happening to ordinary people and nice things happening to celebrities.

At ten pm she switched the television off and sat on the stairs facing the front door. Her phone was in her hand but she didn't play games, just stared silently at the clock.

At 10:45 she got up and walked to the door. She had thought about opening it earlier in the evening and leaving it like that until after 10:48. She'd thought about it for a long time and then decided against it. It might save her tonight but it wouldn't save her forever, because eventually she would need to face this again. Partly for her own sanity and partly because there might still be a way to save him. Instead she knelt before the door and slid her hand through the letterbox, pushing the metal flap that sat on the other side of the door up and out with the backs of her fingers. Squinting her eyes she stared through the small gap between the bottom of the slot and the palm of her hand. She could see her neighbour's house across the street, the soft flicker of the light from their TV visible through a gap in the curtains. The frigid night air carressed her face, cutting through her tiredness. A couple of kids walked past, kicking the pavement and muttering incoherently. She glanced down at her phone on the doormat next to her. 10:47.

She looked up again and saw the street: boring, normal. She looked down at her phone. The numbers switched. 10:48. Two things happened simultaneously. The letterbox slammed shut and the banging began. She screamed, unsure if it was

from the pain of the cold metal smashing against her fingers or from fear. She jerked her hand back, the fingers were bruised, one knuckle cut and bleeding from the impact of the flap against it. The ferocious knocking continued, an ear-splittingly loud tattoo that filled the hallway. The blows being rained upon the door sounded as if they might force it of its hinges but she realised that it was not moving at all.

Tentatively she pushed her hand into the letterbox again. The tips of her fingers met the metal flap and when she pushed it gave, swinging open. She peered out to see nothing. Not just nothing but the absence of anything. An eternal blackness that felt like it might overwhelm her. It almost had a pull to it, like it could suck through the small slot and out into the dark. There was a smell too, the cold odour of raw meat.

The banging stopped and she let the metal flap swing shut. She couldn't remember what she'd meant to achieve but whatever it was she hadn't managed it. All she done was buy herself another day of pain.

When she pushed the letterbox open for a third time she saw the street again. The world, her world, was back.

She didn't want to sleep that night but she did, unable to keep herself awake after having been up since the previous morning. Her dream continued, the faceless thing was there again, the hole where its mouth should be spouting words at her. As it spoke its hands began to poke and knead its face, shaping it as it did into something resembling humanity. At one moment it looked like a rough approximation of her boyfriend's face, then the hands moved again and she realised she was looking at herself. The figure told her what it needed her to do. It needed her to open the door. It said:

„We are coming and you have been chosen to let us through. We are coming and you are blessed to be part of it. We are coming and we will bring him back to you.“

She awoke to the silence of the empty house. The clock radio told her it was noon. She felt rested, better than she had for days. She knew what she had to do now. There was only one thing she could do.

She set about cleaning and tidying the house. He was coming home and she wanted the place to look nice for him.

The male police officer visited again a week later. A follow up call to see if the woman had heard from her boyfriend. Nine times out of ten they did. The missing person came home or at least got in touch to say that they'd left deliberately and voluntarily.

The doorbell hadn't worked on his last visit, he was sure of that, remembered having to knock loudly on the door and the watching distraught woman opening the door in a panic. He gave the bell a push anyway and heard it buzz behind the door, a nasty sound, certainly not what he would have chosen. The woman answered, she looked transformed from the last time she had seen him. Calm. Happy. He explained the reason for his visit and she told him, yes, her boyfriend was back now. She blushed and told him how embarrassed she felt at having panicked that night. He told her that it was fine, these things happened.

„If that's all,“ she said at last, „I must be going. I have so much to do. You see, we have visitors. A houseful. And more arriving every day.“

