

Escape

She puts the book down on the Formica-covered kitchen table. It's *Surfacing*, by Margaret Atwood. Julie, the girl at the library, recommended it to her. Julie is nice. She shows an interest, not like that other one, the old one, who just stamps the books and hands them back without comment, without eye contact. Julie showed her that there are other books, beyond pink-covered Mills and Boone romances and steamy Harold Robbins doorstops. She's enjoyed *Surfacing* and has nearly finished it. She suspects there's something going on beneath the surface of the story, but doesn't know quite what. English wasn't one of her priorities at school. You don't really need it for hairdressing.

The clock says 10:35. He'll probably be home soon. He's normally home by eleven on weekdays. (Not that he has to get up for work in the morning.) The baby gurgles in the bedroom, the small square bedroom the three of them share, but doesn't wake though. She wonders how drunk he'll be tonight. He didn't come home for his tea, so she assumes he's been drinking all evening. Maybe he got lucky at the dogs and is celebrating. Or perhaps he lost and is drowning his sorrows.

She makes another attempt at reading but can't concentrate. She feels a portentous unease tonight. Maybe because it's a week today since he hit her. Since he hit her hard enough for it to show, anyway. The bruise below her eye is just a jaundiced yellow patch now, easy to hide with make-up. The first three days were the hardest, trying to hide it from the clients at the salon. She said she'd tripped over the vacuum cleaner cable and banged her face. She told Julie the librarian the same thing, but she doesn't think Julie believed her.

A car pulls up outside and she hears voices. Male voices, bonded in collective drunkenness.

"See yer, mate! We'll get lucky tomorrow, eh?"

He sounds cheerful, but that's rarely a reliable indicator. The car pulls away noisily and she hears his key scrape against the lock. His lack of coordination isn't a good sign. He abandons his efforts and pounds at the door. She gets up to open it quickly. He'll wake the baby.

"'Bout fucking time." He lurches in and stumbles towards the padded maroon sofa in the small living room. He's tall, and would be skinny if not for the distended beer belly.

"What's for supper?"

Oh God. When she looked in her purse before going to the shops after work, she found he'd taken the £10 she was saving for groceries. There was some stale bread and some tins of baby food.

"Noth... Nothing. I thought you'd eaten." Please don't let him get angry.

"Whad'ya mean 'nothing', you useless cow? What you been doing all night?"

He heaves himself up and meanders across to the kitchen, banging cupboards open and shut. He sees the thin, plastic-covered library book splayed open on the table.

"Been reading that crap again, 'ave yer?" He picks it up and tries to rip it. The plastic cover protects it and in frustration he throws it at her.

"Does that tell you how to make my dinner? Does that tell you what to do when I wanna fuck you? Ain't nothing in them poxy books you need to know."

She backs away from him. His face is red from exertion and alcohol. She can read the signs easily by now. The nasty, horny glint in his eye comes next. This is where he shows her he can still do one of the things a man is supposed to do. Do it to *her*.

He moves towards her with surprising agility. Arms around her, he stumbles and they both fall into the living room. The threadbare carpet provides meagre cushioning; her head thuds dully and she's momentarily dazed. She feels his large hand reach under her skirt and pull her knickers down below her knees. His tobacco and beer breath is stifling and she turns her head away and squeezes her eyes tight shut. He fumbles with his fly and she hears the zipper and feels him, half stiff against her thigh.

So, once again she becomes putty. An amorphous mass to be squeezed, molded, pressed into shape beneath him, offering minimal resistance. But putty eventually hardens. It solidifies, strengthens, becomes brittle. She's had enough.

She uses all of her strength to squeeze her body out from under him. He slumps, surprised and confused to be facing the carpet. She stands quickly, kicks her panties off to avoid having to bend to pull them up. He grunts and pushes himself upright. There's anger in his eyes now, like last week when he was thrown out of the pub for starting a fight. She prays that she'll get the timing right. She's rehearsed it in her head many times (knowing that it would come to this?) *Surfacing* isn't the only new book she's read. He moves forward. She aims the kick, and her leg moves in a long, deadly arc. Her foot is travelling very fast when it strikes his crotch. She almost believes she feels a crunch. She definitely hears his agonised exclamation of pain. He falls to his knees then reels onto the floor.

The baby wakes and cries. She moves fast, gathering only the essentials: her purse, her savings account passbook (her access to the money he can't steal), the keys to the car. *Her* car, the one she saved for and repays the loan for. She takes her baby girl from the cot and wraps her in the small woolen blanket. The baby cries. "Shh. It's all right baby."

It *will* be all right. She's finally escaping from this nightmare. Taking her baby away, away from this monster. At the street door she casts her eyes back one last time. He's dragged himself onto a chair, still doubled up, coughing hard. His eyes look up at her, imploring.

"What're you doing?"

"I'm going, Bob. I'm leaving."

"Where? Don't go. I'm sorry."

She says nothing. She feels nothing. She stopped feeling a long time ago, to protect herself. A slight shake of the head is all she can offer him, and then she's gone.

The large neat letters written under the door bell read "J. Lewis". She presses the button and hears a faint buzzing coming deep from within the ground-floor flat. A shadow on the frosted glass of the street door precedes the arrival of its owner. Julie doesn't hide her surprise at seeing this waif-like creature with a bundled up baby on her door step.

"Goodness! Er... hello. What are you doing here?"

Nervousness makes her gush. "I... I didn't have anywhere to go. I've left him. He attacked me. I looked up your address in the phone book. I thought maybe I could... I'm sorry, I'll find somewhere else." She turns away.

She looks awful. Blotchy skin, red eyes, hair lank and lifeless.

"No, wait. Come in. You're in no fit state. Sorry, I was just a bit surprised to see you. I've got friends who can help. They'll find you somewhere safe to stay. Stay here for now. I'm glad you came to me. Really. Come in."

The flat is bright and clean and there are books lining the walls and on the sofa sits a well-dressed young man who smiles shyly and says politely, "Hello." And for the first time in far too long she allows herself to believe there may be hope.

"This is Dave," Julie says. "Dave this is... I'm really sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Rose," she says, "My name's Rose."