One

The Walls had been on holiday, and had moved back in to their new house. It was their first return to the new house since they moved in to it. The soapy residue that collected under the soap dish had dried during their holiday. Now the soap adhered to the dish, and the dish to the kitchen surface. The soap in the dish was used for washing hands after washing the dishes. It moisturised and balmed the skin. After some gentle tugging, Madeline prised the soap from the dish and the dish from the soap. She dropped the soap-covered dish into the sink. It sank and clattered amongst the day's crockery. Madeline had washed the glassware and decided to leave the rest until later on, in the evening. They'd eaten their evening meal early. She had made chicken francaise with potatoes gratin and asparagus. They'd purchased the ingredients, and the requisite dry white wine, whilst on holiday. Slightly drunk, Madeline sat down at the kitchen table and quietly enjoyed her house. The return emotionally secured it for her, and dissipated its vestigial newness. Helen and Claire were playing in the garden. From the kitchen, their shrieks and screams were pleasantly muffled and distant.

The house was Georgian, detached, and Madeline liked to think that it emanated grandeur in as modest a manner as a grand thing could. Beyond the attendant stresses and difficulties of moving, they had discovered relatively few problems with the house. It had been unoccupied for four years, but it had been renovated in the 70s, and all of its vital processes were in good working order. They had an electrician look over the electrics and a plumber the plumbing. They had to pull out old carpets, but in most rooms they left the floorboards revealed. They had re-carpeted the dining room. They had to strip old wallpaper out of most of the rooms, and then they had redecorated, but little work besides that had been necessary. The garden was unkempt and overgrown, but judicious pruning and subsequent affection had set it well on its way to a full recovery. The house's atmosphere had survived its in-occupancy less well, and many of the upstairs rooms were damp. They installed a number of dehumidifiers, and so far the dampness had not returned. The front door's lock had stuck, a few days before they were due to leave on holiday. They called the estate agents who recommended a locksmith. The locksmith unstuck it and said that it had partially seized up, but that it didn't need replacing.

Two (one)

"Brilliant locksmith."

"Sorry?"

"Brilliant locksmith, wasn't he? On your friend at the estate agent's recommendation."

"Oh Thomas, what's the matter?"

"The lock is stuck again!" Thomas angrily turned the key back and forth in its lock.

"It might just be stiff, or the cold weather–" Madeline's suggestions were not entertained.

"Honestly, you sound like a cowboy locksmith yourself! It's stuck again, now! He said that it was just stiff, so lubricated it. It was still stuck. So he got out some tools and unstuck it, or so we thought. Then we paid him. Now it is stuck again."

"Oh, I don't know Thomas, I can call the company back."

"So we can pay him again? Only for it to stick again? We don't need to pay him to do that. It is stuck now, we may as well just leave it stuck and save the bother."

"Why do you think that everybody is out to rob you all the time? I'm sure they'd do it for free anyway."

"It wouldn't be for free. We've already paid him."

"Well then they'll have no problem sending him round to complete the job, will they? You talk as though he planned to have it stick again!"

"Oh no, of course not. As I said, he's obviously a quite brilliant locksmith. It is this lock that's the problem. It must pose a great challenge. Near impossible to unstick. Un-unstickable! The lock that's used on half the houses in England."

"Don't be so sarcastic, Thomas–"

"I'm not being sarcastic. A locksmith as brilliant as the one your friend recommended would–"

"Well then what do you propose? We can't do anything about it ourselves."

"Of course we can. I could fix it I'm sure. How difficult can it be?"

"Thomas we need to use the door on a daily basis. Won't you just let me call back the company tomorrow?"

"It won't take me all that long, for god's sake. Why don't we just use the back door for a couple of days?"

"The back door? Oh, it'll be such a hassle, traipsing round through the back with the shopping, and the girls, and the delivery is next week, plus–"

"What delivery?"

"The shelves. How are we supposed to bring those all round through the back gate?"

"When are the shelves arriving?"

“On Tuesday.”

“It won’t take me five days! Have some faith in me, please, Madeline. Let’s just use the back door for a couple of days.”

Two (two)

Helen lay down on her bed and looked up at the ceiling for a few minutes. The sun shone in through her window and on to the bed. She had positioned herself so that most of her body was out of the sun, and that just her left shoulder was in it. Every twenty seconds or so she would offer the back of her forearm or her knee to a patch of direct sunlight, and then withdraw it. The patch of sunlight was shaped like a kite. If she knew the sun was going to make this particular shape she would run upstairs as soon as her mum had gotten her and her sister back into the house from school. She could tell whether or not the sun would be in the right place by checking its position in the sky as they arrived home. By resting her head on the lip of the car door; by squinting one eye at the lamppost next to their house as the car approached it; by lining the lamppost up with the metal band wrapped around the telegraph pole as the car turned left into the driveway. By the relative position of the sun to these co-ordinates she could determine whether she’d be able to lie on her bed and enjoy its concentrated warmth.

Helen heard the cry of a cuckoo. As well as the sun shining through her window, this year’s early spring had afforded her the pleasure of regular cuckoo appearances in the garden since mid-April. Her mum had told her that she should consider herself very lucky that so many cuckoos visit the Walls garden. Helen rose from the bed and walked to the window. The sash windows throughout the house were aged, but not rotten. She tried to lift her sash window so that she could poke her head out of it and survey the garden for cuckoos. But she couldn’t. The window seemed stuck. She pressed her face to the glass, but could not see any cuckoos. Their population was declining, her mum had said.

Two (three)

“Did you lock the back door? Where’s the key? I can’t open the door.” Madeline was in the kitchen. She sighed and closed her eyes before responding to her husband’s tense shouted questions. He hadn’t yet fixed the front door lock, and Madeline was hoping he would procrastinate until Monday. Monday was the agreed deadline upon which she could call back the locksmith company to come and unstick the lock, had Thomas not got around to doing so. Or if he had tried to do so and failed. Madeline had also hoped the back door lock and everything else would behave itself until then. Mainly because of Thomas’s hateful mood around the subject. He was prone to anger and complaint, generally, but would rarely address his anger’s general causes, instead fixating on some minor stress or inconvenience. She wished that he would probe inside himself, would ask himself why a stuck lock could bring him close to rage. She knew he lacked the will to ask himself those questions; and though she loved him, she was beginning to think that he did not possess the necessary mental equipment either. Taking care to avoid any trace of exasperation in her voice, she said: “I’ve got the key here, dear. I’ll bring it down.”

“Well?” said Thomas rudely as she reached the back door. She jingled the keys at him.

“I thought we’d agreed to leave the back door unlocked?”

“I thought I had. I must have forgotten.”

“Forgotten not to lock it?” Madeline ignored this comment. Madeline had various tactics that she deployed in order to try and ameliorate unpleasant domestic moods. One was to ignore contemptuous remarks and respond instead with something completely unrelated, in a lighter tone.

“I wonder how your Mum’s getting on with those plants?” These inanities were often, in their turn, ignored by Thomas. She attempted to unlock the door. It was already unlocked.

“It’s already unlocked Thomas.” He grabbed the door handle and pulled it.

“Well why won’t it open then?”

“I don’t know. Do you want to try it yourself?” She moved to the side of the door. She did not wait for a response to her question, as the answer was obvious. He turned the key back and forth. He pulled the door.

“It’s definitely unlocked. Look – this is me locking it, there. And then unlocking it. But try the door... And it won’t open.”

“Maybe there is something jamming it?”

“Jamming it.” Thomas said incredulously. He lent down and ran his index along the bottom of the door frame, then rising, the left hand side, stretching, across the top, then down the right hand side.

“There’s nothing jamming it.”

“Well, maybe it’s jammed from the other side. Let’s go out and have a look.”

“How do you propose we do that? How do we go out and have a look? The lock in the front door is stuck. We can’t… I haven’t had a chance to fix it yet.” Though not exactly a concession, his attack faltered and his tone softened as he stumbled into this last fact.

“Well we’ll have to ring the company now, won’t we?” Madeline was careful to keep her tone soft too. She did not want to overplay her hand. Thomas stared at the door and tried to think of a reason not to call the company. Madeline did not wait for a response. She walked into the kitchen and rang the locksmith company.

“Hello. Yes you can. I need to call out for a locksmith urgently. You sent somebody round the other day, but the lock is still stuck, and now our back door is stuck too. Yes please.” She could hear Thomas repeatedly trying the lock, the door, the lock, the door.

“Walls. Madeline Walls. Walls. Walls.”

“For god’s sake. Walls!” Thomas shouted from the back door.

“Walls. Walls. W, A, L, L, S. Yes. Madeline.”

“Idiots.”

“Thomas! Hello? No, I wasn’t talking to you. Sorry. Yes, we had a man out. For the lock. It was stuck. Yes he did. Though it stuck again. Yes. And now the back lock’s stuck.” “The back door is stuck!”

“Sorry, the actual door is stuck. All around the frame. We can’t get it open. And the lock on the front door is stuck as well. Yes. Right away. Well, how soon can you? We can’t get out of the house. This afternoon?”

“Let me speak to them! I need to go in to the office this morning!”

Madeline muffled the receiver with her hand. “Thomas! For god’s sake! I’m trying to sort this out.”

“How on earth do I get out of the house Madeline?”

“You can climb out of the window.”

“Incredible. Just incredible. I don’t-”

“Yes. Hello? Yes. Could you specify a time this afternoon? Three o’ clock. Thank you.”

“Ask if they will charge us Madeline!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, hello? Hello? Yes. I was just wondering if we would be charged? Not for the front door lock. Right. Okay. No that’s fine. Thank you. Bye”

“Great.”

“I’m sure you’d rather them charge us for the front door lock as well?”

“Don’t be silly Madeline. We can barely afford all this work!”

“We can. Anyway, the man is coming out at three now. I don’t suppose you’ll be back from the office by then?”

“Oh I’ll be back by then. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Okay, that’s good.” Madeline did not think it was good.

Three (one)

Mere days after the locksmith had been called out for the second time, first the front and then the back lock stuck again. Madeline knew that it would be fruitless to try and coax Thomas into calling the company for a third visit. The second was difficult enough. The locksmith unstuck the front door’s lock with little fuss. He was initially amazed at what had happened to the back door. He wondered aloud what could have caused it. Perhaps some agent in the glue used during the door’s manufacturing process had created this strange reaction? He had many theories but admitted he really did not know. That he had not seen anything like it. Thomas’s constant asides however soon dampened the man’s enthusiasm and hardened his friendly curiosity. Bristling, he inferred that Madeline and Thomas had glued the door shut themselves. Whether or not he actually believed that they had, Madeline could see how that theory might compel. She wondered herself, about Thomas. Had he glued the thing himself out of spite, an irascible, irrational response to imagined indignities suffered at the hands of the locksmith company? The locksmith took the door off its hinges and scraped off the residue of glue, or the glue-like substance, from inside the door frame and from the edge of the door itself. He replaced the door on its hinges and invoiced them for a consultation.

Upon discovering that both the front and back door’s locks were again stuck, and after arguing about it, rather listlessly on Madeline’s part, Madeline and Thomas had agreed to try and unstick the locks themselves and then temporarily leave the doors unlocked. Thomas managed to unstick both locks by using an oil lubricant and turning the keys with a pair of pliers. They reasoned that their area really was quite safe. The estate agent had mentioned the low rate of burglaries and the watchful and protective community spirit around this area. They could inform their nearest neighbours, the Colliers and the Deans. The efficacy of the alarm system. One or the other of them were in the house most of the time. Thomas promptly purchased and installed sliding bolt locks for both the doors, which they could use whilst in the house. One or the other door would always be bolted. The arrangement, whilst not ideal, was peaceable, and so neither Madeline nor Thomas were eager to disturb it.

Three (two)

Thomas practically ran into the front door as he tried to open it. He was leaving for work. His force, exerted upon the door in the way that one unthinkingly does when not anticipating any resistance, thumped his shoulder into the jamb. He bellowed, not in pain but in inconsolable frustration. He shook the handle uselessly. The front door was stuck. The actual door itself, as the back door had been. He threw down his work bag and strode through the house, opening the back door with deliberate violence, vowing before reaching it that he would kick it open if it was stuck too. It wasn't. From the shed he acquired a chisel, a hammer, a mallet, a screwdriver and a crowbar, scattering them on the floor in front of the front door and dropping to his knees. The resultant noise bought Madeline running down the stairs. Helen and Claire asked what the noise was.

"Helen, help your sister to get ready for school, please – Thomas, what are you doing?" "I'm going to open the door. With a crowbar. The front door is stuck now."

"Maybe it's become locked again–"

"It's the actual door. Like the back door was." Madeline was disturbed, but pretended that she was not.

"Aren't you going to work, darling?"

"Not until this is fixed. I'm going to prise it open."

"Why don't you wait until this evening? What if you break it accidentally?"

"It is broken. It is stuck! I'm trying to fix it. I'm going to get it unstuck. I'm going to prise it open."

"With a crowbar?"

"Well, yes. That's what a crowbar is for. Prising things."

"It's what a burglar uses."

"Well exactly. Burglars open windows and doors, don't they?" The residue of the glue or glue-like substance was visible around the edges of the door. Thomas began scraping it off with the chisel.

"Careful you don't scratch it, Thomas."

"For god's sake. The door is probably ruined away. It's covered in glue! There must be something wrong with the doors. We'll probably have to get new doors anyway, the way this is going."

"Maybe we could just clean the glue off? Just take care not to scratch them, in case they can be salvaged? Maybe we should leave this to a professional."

"For god's sake Madeline, I can do some things by myself you know! The last professional we left it to had no idea what was going on. All he did was take the door off and put it back on again. I saw what he did. He prised the door open on one side. Then he unscrewed the hinges. Then he prised off the other side. So that's what I'm going to do. Then I'm going to put some tape or plastic around the edge of the door, between the door and the frame, to stop it happening again. Right." He nestled the crowbar into the crack of the door, near the bottom. He tapped it three times with the mallet. He removed the crowbar and repeated the process, first parallel to the door handle and then near the top.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to ease it open gradually, gently. I wouldn't want to scratch the door now would I?" Madeline stared at the door. Her left arm was wrapped defensively around her body and her right hand covered her mouth. "For god's sake Madeline," said Thomas upon turning around and looking at her over his shoulder, "can you not look so worried? It's not life or death surgery. You're making me nervous." She removed her hand from her mouth and sat down on the bottom step of the staircase, which roughly faced the front door, to watch the procedure.

"Right." Thomas inserted the crowbar slowly into the crack of the door, just below the door handle. He leant on it firmly and pushed it forwards in to the door. The effort badly splintered the jamb and dented the door without easing the latter from the former whatsoever.

"Good job it's not life or death surgery, isn't it?"

Three (three)

Helen was trying to enthuse her younger sister about cuckoos, who was struggling to discern between the idea of a cuckoo in particular and of a generic bird. Claire could not hold as much information in her head as Helen could. Helen did not know whether this was due to Claire's much younger age, or an inferior intelligence. Helen rather fancied the latter, and found the notion that she might be the brightest sibling greatly appealing. A cuckoo called again.

"There you go Claire! Can you hear it?" "Yes."

"What makes that sound?"

"A cuckoo."

"That's right. Do you know what a cuckoo looks like?" "Yes."

"Can you describe it?"

"Hmm... I can if I wanted."

"Go on then."

"I don't want to."

"Okay, do you think you would know one if you saw one?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Helen got up off her bed and pressed her face to the glass of her bedroom window, which her mum and dad had still not fixed for her. A cuckoo was perched on the tree across from the north face of the house. There were no other birds visible from her bedroom but she could hear the cries of dunnocks, sparrows and chaffinches. She needed more birds. Much to Helen's chagrin, visiting birds usually congregated on the other side of the house. Helen needed some more birds for Claire to pick from. It would not make for much of a challenge if Claire had only to identify a cuckoo amongst cuckoos.

"We will go up to your room to get a better look Claire. Mum and Dad still haven't fixed my window. Come on!" The sisters bound up the stairs together. Helen tried to heave her sister's sash window open. It was stuck. There were two windows in her sister's room. The other was stuck also. Helen growled.

"You're not strong enough. You need daddy."

"I'm strong enough Claire. I need daddy to fix the windows because they're stuck and they won't open. I'm strong enough. Let's have a look in the bathroom." Claire dutifully followed her sister as she went back down the stairs and tried the window in the first floor bathroom, and back up to try their parents' room. All the windows seemed to be stuck.

"We'll just have to spot the cuckoos in the garden, won't we Claire? Let's get our coats on."

Three (four)

Shortly after Thomas had prised the front door open the back door began to stick. Thomas prised that open too. After being prised, cleaned and replaced on their hinges the front and back door would soon stick again. It took the glue or glue-like substance about three days to return and adhere the door to its frame once more. Thomas's method of prising open the door and then creating a barrier of plastic between the door and its frame was unsuccessful. The door glued itself to the plastic, the plastic the frame, the frame the plastic. Despite Madeline's implorations, Thomas refused to solicit any further professional help or advice. Thereafter they arrived at tacit, uneasy compromises. So as not to concede any ground on the issue of outside help, Thomas was forced to temper his characteristic cynicism and negativity. To admit the problem was overwhelming would be to admit to needing help with it. So Thomas downplayed the doors and their insistent secretions and Madeline was happy to suppress her own concern for the sake of a conciliatory household.

All the windows were stuck together. Thomas maintained that the problem with the windows was unrelated to the one with the doors. They may have expanded with the warmer weather, or been painted shut when the outsides of the house were last decorated. Madeline had pointed out that the windows had all been opened since they bought the house but regretted doing so. She did not want to follow that line of argument herself. The wood must have expanded due to the warm weather, causing the windows to jam closed.

A pile of letters addressed to the previous occupants glued themselves together. They had been accumulating on the floor near the front door, piled neatly on top of a product catalogue should their addressees arrive to collect them. Their addressees did arrive to collect them. The Eldons. When Madeline picked up the letters she thought they were wet.

"Oh I am sorry, I really don't know how–"

"Oh no it is fine, I'm sure." said Mrs. Eldon.

"We really should have come round for them before now, but we have–"

"This one's stuck to the top Greg." Mr. Eldon watched as Mrs. Eldon tore the topmost letter from the one beneath, tearing its envelope. Mr. and Mrs. Eldon looked up at Madeline.

"Oh I am so sorry I don't know how that's happened, we were ever so careful with the letters–" Mr. and Mrs. Eldon resumed their inspection of the pile of letters. They were all stuck together. Mrs. Eldon suspended the entire pile by holding a torn corner of the topmost envelope between her thumb and forefinger.

"It looks like... glue?" said Mr. Eldon.

"I don't know, I don't think so, the atmosphere–"

"The atmosphere?"

"I am so sorry! We've been having some problems with the house, with the doors. We think the atmosphere might be effecting them."

"The doors?"

Madeline thought there little point in further attempting to explain the behaviour of the doors to the Eldons. She would sound mad. She decided instead to get rid of the Eldons as quickly as possible.

"Yes my husband has been doing some DIY with the doors. He must have spilt some glue on your letters accidentally. Allow me to clean them off for you–" she gestured to take them from Mrs. Eldon's pinched fingers but Mrs. Eldon just stood still and looked at her.

"Er... No, it's quite alright. I'm sure they'll be fine. It's only on the envelopes I think."

"He must have spilt quite a lot of glue, they are practically coated."

"Greg."

"I am so sorry, I hope there is nothing of value in there, I–"

"Oh no, just old... accounts and newsletters and things."

"If there is anything of value we will of course recompense you, I–"

"I'm sure they will be fine." The Eldons left.

Three (five)

"Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!"

"What is it Claire? I'm busy. Where are you?"

"I'm under the stairs! Toby won't come out of his basket! He's crying!"

"Where's your sister? She is meant to be playing with you."

"I want to play with Toby and Helen doesn't like Toby because he chases birds!" Toby was the family cat. He was ginger with irregular spots of brilliant white. "And Toby's crying!"

Madeline could hear that Toby was indeed crying and thought immediately that if anything Claire's affections were probably the cause of his upset.

"He's probably tired darling! Let him be. He might want to go to sleep, and if you're constantly cuddling him–"

"But look at him mummy he's crying and he can't–"

"Okay Claire I'm looking, I'm looking!" Madeline crouched under the stairs to look at Toby. His face was pulled into a grimace. The flesh and fur around his jaw was curled back over his upper incisors on the right side of his face. His right foreleg was raised next to his face so that he presented the palm of his paw to Madeline as she peered at him. In places his fur appeared to be wet and matted and he cried keenly. She leant in to comfort him, to caress his screeching head. His right paw and cheek was stuck to the side of his basket. Distressed, he swatted at the affixed paw and cheek, and at Madeline. She cupped his head with her hand and tried to free the cat's head from the basket. The back of his head was covered in the glue, or glue-like substance. She had so far avoided much contact with the glue or glue-like substance. It was very cold, like melting ice-cream. She exerted as gentle a pressure as she could on the cat's head, attempting to pull him away from his basket. She pulled his head free, but in doing so tore tufts of fur from it. The glue had become integral to the patches of fur it had touched, and by pulling the cat's head Madeline had snapped the strands of fur untouched by the glue or glue-like substance. Toby continued to wail. She released her grip.

"What's wrong with him mummy, why he is crying? Is he stuck?"

"He is stuck darling but you mustn't worry. Mummy and Daddy need to take him to the vet to get him unstuck. He'll be back as soon as you know it!"

Madeline gathered the blankets around Toby and scooped the entire basket up in her arms. Claire wailed in chorus with the cat.

Three (six)

Thomas had taken Toby to the veterinary surgery. The doctor had accused the Walls of deliberate cruelty and after treating Toby had detained Thomas in the surgery for over an hour. Thomas protested the family's innocence but could not otherwise explain the condition of the cat. The cat did indeed look as though it had been glued into its basket. Thomas produced credentials and cited references descriptive of the good character and social standing of the Walls. Eventually the doctor deigned to release Thomas, but demanded that the cat remain in his care until the rest of the Walls could attend the surgery to collect him. The doctor assured Thomas this measure would allay concerns he still held about the safety of the animal, and added that the family needn't wait until then to pay their invoice. The cost of Toby's treatment was considerable for what Thomas thought amounted to little more than a bath. He did not raise the issue.

Upon returning from the veterinary surgery, Madeline prepared dinner whilst Thomas angrily relayed his experience from the kitchen table. She made baked cod, baking the fish in packets of tinfoil with spinach, cherry tomatoes, red onion and baby spinach. Thomas was furious and his curses and complaints about the doctor were desperate. Madeline protracted the meal's preparation as she preferred the invective hurled at her back, even if it was not intended for her.

"I made that parsley sauce we like this morning, to have with these fillets."

"Right. Why did you make it this morning?"

"Oh, Helen... Helen has taken an interest in cooking. I thought I may as well make it this morning as I didn't really have anything else planned, and show her how whilst I did it."

"A little advanced for her age isn't it? Herbs and sauces?"

"I think we should encourage her. It's just a sauce. I just thought I'd show her whatever it is I'm up to, and she picks up what she picks up as she goes along."

"Will it be alright now, hours later? Aren't you supposed to eat parsley fresh?"

"Well I'm going to have it on mine. You don't have to if you feel that way about it." She opened the fridge and took out the parsley sauce which she had decanted into an empty squeezy ketchup bottle. Thomas regarded the bottle disdainfully.

"Do you want some?" Madeline offered him the bottle.

"Thank you." He vigorously shook the bottle of sauce over his plate. None came out. He squeezed it a few times, then shook it a few times. He sighed and repeated the process. "Hmm it was quite creamy," said Madeline, "perhaps if you take the lid off?" "Hmm?"

"The white part. If you screw that off... Now try it."

"It must have gone off. Set. Like I said, you're supposed to eat that sauce fresh. Unless it's frozen. I said that we shouldn't have the fridge so cold, didn't I?"

"Oh for god's sake, it's not frozen! I just took all that food out of the fridge an hour ago, none of that was frozen."

"Well liquids freeze more quickly, don't they? Even creamy parsley sauces."

Madeline stood up with an inhalation and opened the fridge door. Thomas turned round in his chair and eyed the contents over Madeline's shoulder.

"Yes, Madeline, get that ketchup, and that mustard. I bet they're frozen too." She handed them over to him. He methodically opened, shook and squeezed each bottle in turn over his plate. The condiments remained ensconced in their bottles.

Four

Madeline finished running Helen and Claire's nightly bath. Bath-time was another daily chore Madeline had begun to protract in order to distract herself from the ongoing difficulties with the house, and to avoid Thomas. During bath-time she was occupied with the care of the girls and felt cosseted by the steam and noise of the running water. The bath had brass taps that sputtered and ran slowly. Madeline did not fully open the taps so that they would run even slower. The bath was deep, and only the very top of Helen's head was visible when she and her sister both sat down in it. Helen was probably getting old enough to bathe herself, but Madeline was not ready to relinquish any part of her bath-time routine, least of all an entire daughter.

Madeline had sent the girls downstairs to say goodnight to Thomas and sat in the bathroom inhaling the steam from the water whilst it ran. She would run the hot tap for twenty minutes, and then the cold for ten. If the girls came upstairs before the bath was ready, Madeline would lay towels on the floor and they would all play with the bath toys. But they rarely did. Madeline told them they couldn't play in the bath until they had spent some time with daddy. She began to arrange the hair-care products around the edge of the bath. A shampoo, a conditioner, a plastic jug for rinsing and a moisturising shower creme designed for sensitive skin. There was also a bottle of bubble bath, but that was an occasional treat. Helen suffered from eczema, so Madeline avoided products with fragrances. Claire sat on the side of the bath where the taps were situated. This arrangement had been organised between the girls and then presented to Madeline. Each girl had a bath pouf and towels particular to them. Claire's pouf and towels were pale blue and Helen's lemon yellow. Madeline heard them running up the stairs.

"Is it ready yet mummy?"

"Yes it is Claire. Helen, will you help your sister out of her clothes? Did you tell daddy about your pot Claire?"

"Yes he said it was the best one he had ever seen."

"That's great darling." Madeline picked Claire up under her arms and put her in the bath, first dipping her toe in and then withdrawing it, which made her giggle. Helen sat opposite her sister and handed her the blue pouf. Helen would wash herself whilst Madeline washed Claire.

Madeline wondered if the girls might soon enter an argumentative, contentious phase of their relationship, as their cousins recently had. Helen claimed the role of more mature, more responsible older sister. Madeline supported and rewarded this role by delegating tasks involving the care of Claire to Helen, though took care not to patronise Claire by doing so.

Helen thoroughly washed herself with her yellow pouf, and placed it back on the edge of the bath. Madeline had finished washing Claire and was entertaining her with one of the bath toys, a toothless smiley crocodile. She noticed that the water was cloudy. Sometimes the water from the kitchen taps was cloudy, and needed running through for a minute or so before a satisfactorily clear glass could be drawn. This had something to do with pressure. She swirled the water around with her fingers to disperse the clouds.

"Right, it's shampoo time girls." She washed Helen's hair first as she had the patience to wait whilst Claire was having hers washed. She left the shampoo in the girls' hair for about five minutes. The conditioner she left in for as much as fifteen minutes. She would add extra hot water to the bath if it became cold.

Helen observed the water around her as she and her sister sat waiting with the conditioner in their hair.

"The water's cloudy mum."

"I know Helen. It's nothing to worry about. It's caused by pressure from the pipes."

"Pressure?"

"What's pressure mummy?"

"It's when forces inside things, forces that we can't see, act on each other and cause them to behave in certain ways. I'll explain it in more detail another day."

"I understand."

"Don't say you do if you don't Claire. It's a hard thing to understand."

"Well let's run a bit more water and see if we can't get it a bit clearer."

"It feels funny mum. Are you sure it's alright?" Madeline tested it again with her hands. It was silty. She reached behind Claire and opened the hot tap a little. It sputtered away.

"It's fine Helen. Just pressure, like I said."

"It doesn't feel nice on my shoulders mum." said Helen. Claire immediately detected the worry in her sister’s voice.

“Can I get out now mummy?”

“You’ve still got your conditioner on, girls. We’ll wash it off then we’ll get out, okay? You like bath-time usually, don’t you?”

“It’s the water mum, it doesn’t feel nice.”

“It feels fine to me, Helen, look.” Madeline took the plastic jug and ran it through the water, filling and pouring it out again to demonstrate that the water, aside from its cloudiness, was behaving as it should. The water had not cleared, as the water from the kitchen taps did. The tap had stopped sputtering though she hadn’t closed it. “It feels funny on my skin.”

“Well your head will feel funny if we don’t wash this conditioner off, come on.” Madeline dunked the plastic jug into the water to fill it. The water wasn’t behaving as it should. In places it resisted the jug as she pushed it through the water. When she pulled it out, it seemed to snag slightly, as if it were being lightly held by suction. Using her height to obscure her scrutiny from the girls, Madeline turned round from the bath and checked the water in the jug, sloshing it around, assuring herself that it did slosh and splash. She raised herself up onto her knees to rinse the girls’ hair off.

“Close your eyes, Claire. Are you ready?”

“Yes mummy!” She poured the jug of water over Claire’s head with her right hand, and tried to knead it with her left. But she couldn’t get her hand through Claire’s hair. She dropped the jug into the water and gripped Claire’s head in both hands. Her hair was plastered to her head. The glue, or the glue-like substance, had stuck Claire’s hair fast to her head and was beginning to stick Madeline’s hands to it too. She pulled her hands away with some difficulty.

“Ow mummy!”

“Right girls we’re getting out now.” She wiped the glue or glue-like substance off her hands on the side of the bath and started to lift Claire out of the bath. The bath resisted. “Thomas! Thomas!”

“What’s the matter mum? You haven’t rinsed my hair yet. I’m–” Helen shrieked. She had been running her hands through her hair and they were now stuck in it. Madeline let go of Claire and began to attend to Helen. She tried to prise Helen’s fingers from her head but they tugged at her hair and her hair at her scalp. The glue or glue-like substance was thicker in some places than others. It was not consistent. Madeline could feel her own fingers becoming stuck as she tried to work free Helen’s.

“Mummy the water feels horrible! I can’t move in it! There’s bits in it!”

“Just stay still Claire, we’ll get you out in a minute your daddy’s coming–”

“Mum my fingers are stuck! Help me!”

“Thomas! Thomas! Helen I’m trying to help you, you just have to be very still.” Madeline heard Thomas bounding up the stairs. “What on earth Madeline?”

“What do you think Thomas?”

“Oh god, are they stuck?” He bent down to pick Claire up out the bath.

“Why is it happening Thom? You have to help us, it’s all over the girls!”

“It’s okay, calm down, I’m getting Claire out of the bath, you help Helen, is she–” Claire yelped in pain as he tried to lift her.

“It pulls daddy, it pulls daddy!”

“Oh god Madeleine, she’s stuck!”

“Lift her out quickly, get her out now!”

“I think it’ll hurt her–”

“It’s sticking more, we have to get them out now! Pull Claire up first, I’ll get Helen. Helen stay still darling, you’ll be fine–”

“God, my hands are sticking to her–”

“Be brave Claire daddy’s going to get you out!” Thomas lifted Claire completely out of the bath. She started screaming, but Thomas wasn’t sure whether it was just general distress or because a very thin piece of skin had been torn off her leg when he had pulled her from the bath. Blood appeared around it. Thomas was not sure that Claire had even noticed so quickly reached for a towel and wrapped it round her legs. Madeline and Thomas looked at one another, and said ambulance. Thomas rushed downstairs with Claire bundled in his arms.

“Stay still Helen, okay?” Madeline thought that Helen’s hands, still stuck to her head, would have blocked her vision of Claire’s extraction from the bath. A piece of Claire’s skin lay on top of the bath water, now mostly glue, or glue-like substance.

“Where’s Claire?”

“Your daddy’s taken her downstairs, if you just stay still for a moment I’ll take you downstairs too–”

“Mum what’s happening, the shampoo is getting in my eyes, I can’t see.”

“It’s okay just keep your eyes shut–”

“I can’t open my eyes!”

“I’m going to grab you now, darling.” she gripped Helen’s ribs, repositioning her hands to effect the smoothest trajectory when she yanked her out. Helen’s skin was wet from the water, which was now mostly glue, or glue-like substance. The surface of her skin was tacky, and began to affix Madeline’s hands to it immediately. Madeline pulled her hands off before they stuck completely.

“Ow, that hurt! Come on mum, get me out!”

“Thomas! Can you bring some gloves up! Quickly!”

“Mum what do you need gloves for? I’ll get out myself–”

“Stay still! Thomas!”

Thomas had laid Claire out on the kitchen table. He had wrapped her completely in the blue bath towel and propped her head up on a pillow from the living room sofa. He called an ambulance but the reception was terrible. He could hear it ringing, and then transferring to the automated voice, the one that asks you what kind of emergency you are experiencing. He shouted down the phone what kind of emergency he was experiencing. It rang through. But he could only really discern that because he already knew the emergency call procession from ring, to automated voice, to ring. The sounds were distorted. Everything he heard on the other line sounded underwater. He shouted the address down the phone.

"Gloves! Thomas! Hurry up!" He shouted the address down the phone a few more times and replaced the handset. "I'm coming Madeline!"

"Where are you going daddy?"

"I'm just going to get your sister darling, be a good girl and wait here!" He grabbed the rubber gloves from the side of the sink and put them on. Immediately they stuck to his hands. He felt his fingers constricted by the glue or glue-like substance inside the gloves. He began to pull the left-hand glove off with his right hand. It pulled the skin off the back of his wrist with it, so he left them on.

"Madeline, the gloves don't work!" he shouted upstairs. "Just bring Helen down now!" Madeline grabbed Helen and pulled her up as hard as she could. Helen was stuck to the bath, and Madeline's effort only partially removed her from it. Madeline became stuck to Helen.

Thomas heard a commotion upstairs. "Madeline?"

"Daddy, this towel is wet and cold, daddy–"

"Be brave Claire, we'll get you warmed up soon–" "Get the towel off me daddy!"

"Okay, okay," he tried to calm Claire, "here I am." He started to unwrap the towel from around Claire's head, but it took some of Claire's head with it. He stuck the flap of towel back around her head. His rubber gloves were now stuck to Claire and the towel, and his hands were stuck inside the rubber gloves.

"Madeline?"

Five

The entire house was glued, or gluing. Everything was melting, or stretching, or smothered. There was no air or gravity or atmosphere but a morass of glue through which everything was pulled and pushed and had became infused with. Fibres from the carpets and the curtains and clothes were everywhere floating through the glue. Where the glue pushed up from the floor or down from the ceiling, tables and chairs and picture frames were suspended in the middle of rooms. Colour and grain from the wood of the house's inner doors peeled off in sheets, sucked out by the glue. These sheets were thin and would curl at the top as they rose from the door and then splinter or explode or become glued to another mass of matter, colour, surface. A new sheet would emerge behind the last. Some of the doors no longer had colour or grain, and were beginning to lose their constancy as doors. They bent inwards or outwards, spilling over onto the walls or the ceiling or the floor. The contents of the glued house were stuck, still, but were also constantly moving.

In the kitchen, and in the bathroom, parts of the Walls melted into space. The glue, or glue-like substance, sucked water out of the taps, food from the fridge and plants from their pots. Light and dark spread slowly in diffuse blooms, momentarily occupying this or that area, commingling when they met. The pressure of the glue, or glue-like substance, had shattered the light bulbs and the light from them fell out and spread into the immediate area surrounding the explosions. The cables reached down from the ceiling to the floor, flattening out and becoming stringy, separating into new strands as they moved. On their way down they met cables trailing upwards, from table lamps and appliances. As they met they formed webs across rooms. Everything had become plastic but mutable. The glue, or glue-like substance, was not consistent. It was opaque here, translucent there. It did not lap at surfaces, or cover them, but it rather digested things. The house was digesting. Nothing had a proper edge or outline, and was always seemingly swelling or collapsing, being pulled this way or that by the glue, or glue-like substance.