

Prologue

One good push releases the handle, and the brass tongue withdraws into the lock.

'I'm sorry, we're actually closed.' A young woman is fussing behind the counter.

Entering, I peruse the shelves closest to the door.

'Victorian fittings – it never locks properly unless I use the key. Sorry.' Her words travel towards me; I swat them away.

There's a blackboard sign by my feet with the shop's opening hours announced in pink and emerald chalk. Upcoming events are listed, author talks and play-group sessions. Stickers in the shape of lions and elephants dot the clean white walls.

'We open at nine. If you'd like to come back tomorrow?' She's speaking loudly now, all wide mouth and heavy vowels in case I am deaf or don't understand English. My fingers dance across the merchandise as my heels strike the hardwood floor.

The lights at the shop's entrance have been switched off; only after another step forward is my face fully lit. I take my time. I move past the fabric books for babies and linger over a puzzle display. The girl has emerged from behind the counter and fiddles with a string of coloured flags which droop from the ceiling.

'I only get paid 'til six and I've already closed down the system,' she says. 'So I can't sell you anything.'

I cannot come into a children's bookshop during business hours, not when there would be parents and children inside. A few weeks ago I ordered a gardening book online. When the delivery came I prised it open on my doorstep and saw a rectangle peeking out from behind the front cover. It was a promotional bookmark: Give your child the gift of reading this Christmas. Underneath the text, images of the five top-selling children's titles this year

printed in a single column. It felt like the rubber band I wore on my wrist as a girl; the au pair would snap it when she caught me biting my nails. Snap. Standing outside my front door, the bookmark dropped from my fingers, into a puddle of the previous day's rain. It's still there, three weeks later. I close my eyes and step over it to leave the house each morning. Give your child the gift of reading this Christmas. I only took one brief look at it but that was enough.

All day today I've been thinking about the time I read to him from James and the Giant Peach, a favourite from my own childhood. It was summer so we lounged in the garden, a stone plate of sliced white peaches sat between us. Has anyone read to him since me? That's what I keep wondering. I think I know the answer, but the question keeps on tunnelling. Christmas is coming. How am I supposed to survive until the new year?

'I only get paid 'til six?' the girl says again.

It is twenty minutes past six. I extract a single note from my handbag, the new £50 with Alan Turing, and hold it out until she comes.

'Is this . . .' she says, taking it.

'Overtime.'

'Wow. I guess I could turn the computer back on.' She looks lovingly into Turing's flat, red eyes.

'He died of cyanide poisoning,' I tell her, scanning the books filed under the letter K. 'It's a profoundly slow and painful death. Your whole body convulses. Then there's a flood of blood, vomit, bile – until eventually, you run out of oxygen. But only after you beg for it to end.'

She steps backwards and almost crashes into a giant Where's Wally? cut-out. I tilt my head to examine the picture books: one about a wombat, another with an alligator on the cover. My thumb presses their flimsy spines, so easily snapped.

'Were you looking for anything in particular?' she asks, voice cracking on the final syllable.

There's a famous comic where the villain is trying to build an acoustic weapon. 'The Calculus Affair,' I say. 'It's a Tintin book.'

'Let me see if we have it.' The girl scoots behind the counter. *'I know we have Tintin in Tibet and one of the hardback collections.'*

Sound is a wave which can move through air, liquids, solid human bodies, building up pressure. It's been calculated that 240 decibels is required to make a human head explode. If I had one wish, this is how I would like to kill you.

'No, sorry,' she says, disappointed, wondering, no doubt, if this means she'll have to return the money. 'I can order it in for you. Can you wait a week?'

The wish would grant me an evil scientist with crazed hair who would be glad to do it. One word is all it would take. Special headphones over your ears pumping at a 240-decibel volume, not music but speech; one word, repeated over and over until you died. Just one word.

'That won't do,' I say, turning for the exit. 'I'll find it somewhere else.' When I reach the door: *'Keep the money.'*

One wrong word in the right place can be enough to kill.

But you already know that, don't you?

I.

I don't always jump when the phone rings, but today ELLIOT SCHOOL flashing on the screen sends my unsipped coffee to the floor. I do my best with a fistful of serviettes as I answer the call.

'Elliot's alright, but you need to collect him, he's not feeling well.' The barista's machine gasps and splutters and I step out of the café in order to hear. 'How soon can you come?' The voice belongs to the school receptionist.

'He was happy when I left him an hour ago. I don't understand how he could feel poorly so quickly.' It is Elliot's first day of year two. He doesn't love school, but he went today without too much complaint.

'I'm sorry, Revelle,' the receptionist says, her tone suggesting she means it. 'I know this is probably inconvenient. Are you at work?'

'I was about to walk in.'

'It's the policy, in case he's infectious, you know?'

From outside I wave an apology to the waiter for the mess. 'I'm coming,' I say, and speed-walk down Fleet Street to flag a black cab. Inside, I give the address for Elliot's school. He has changed primaries three times already, according to the social worker, Lydia, a fresh classroom of unfamiliar faces with each new foster family. I could have asked her for permission to move him to the school local to me, but I decided to wait until the adoption is confirmed, to not be presumptuous, to not tempt fate. Once the adoption is settled I won't need to ask Lydia for permission to change schools or for anything at all.

Inside the car, I rush through my phone's contact list looking for someone who isn't in the office on a Monday morning. Other people

would call their partner to see if they could work from home for the day, then they'd try the grandparents. I have no plan B.

When we arrive at Greenwich, I ask the driver to keep the meter running. Elliot and the receptionist stand waiting, my son with his sleeves rolled up and a school rucksack on his back. *My son*. The words arrive of their own accord; not forced, for once not strange. I can't help but smile. 'Hey, Batman, you're not feeling well?' I crouch in front of him.

'My throat's a bit sore.' Elliot twists around my leg.

'Honestly, he was fine this morning,' I say, remembering his summer cold last month, but he's been well since then. 'Weren't you, love?'

Elliot shrugs and plucks his Draggie-the-never-washed-dragon toy from his bag – a crutch he's probably too old for. Should I insist on washing it? Is that what parents do? I don't have time to think about that as I bundle him into the car. 9:27am.

Elliot loves black cabs. He wants to sit in the front seat, and I try to explain why it's unsafe without going into gory details about car accidents and what could happen, horrible accompanying images smashing through my mind. Beside me, his eyes are fixed on the window, and I do another scroll through my contacts.

'Gherkin tower. Draggie will beat the Gherkin!'

I reach L then M then all the way to T with still no idea as to who could take Elliot.

'He sure will.' There is no one, absolutely no one I could call.

9:53am. The car turns onto Newgate Street. Paused at traffic lights, the driver's hand finds the radio button and, three words in, it's obvious what the announcers are discussing.

'Sorry, would you mind switching off the sound?' I don't want to hear any commentary or opinion on the matter immediately before court. Not this case, it's too depressing.

The driver eyes me in the rear-view mirror and presses the button with a grunt. The trial is in London's ether. Its molecules have edged

out the lorry fumes and usual pollution so that, this month, it's all anyone is breathing in.

'Batman,' I gently pull him back from the window. 'Would you like to come with me to work today?'

He's uncertain.

'Oh look over there, it's a block of firds,' I say, pointing.

Elliot snorts. 'Flock of birds!'

'You're too good at this.' We ran out of time this morning for my pre-rehearsed game of spoonerisms over breakfast.

'Are you . . .' my jaw drops in mock disgust. 'Are you nicking your pose?'

'I am *not* picking my nose,' he laughs.

Three months ago, I bought a book of kids' jokes the weekend before he came to me. I memorised as many as I could but then, neglecting to ration, used them all up by the end of our first forty-eight hours together. Maybe it was just as well. Children can tell when you're trying too hard.

As we approach the Old Bailey, the cab crawls through puddles of people spread onto the road. 'Bloody circus,' the driver says. 'You'll have to get out here.'

Groups of press, onlookers, cameras, TV vans and tents smother the entrance to Central Criminal Court. When the cab door opens, the roar from the crowd pushes inside.

Why did you catch a bug today of all days? I think to myself, guiding a curl behind Elliot's ear. 9:57am. The defence team will be looking for me. Elliot's palm burrows in mine as we walk towards the door.

Four witness service volunteers loiter at the entrance. All hands on deck for the final days of a fraught proceeding. 'I'm the interpreter,' I tell one of them. 'Court thirteen.'

'There's a juror caught in traffic,' she says. 'We're on Old Bailey time, as usual, so you've about another ten minutes.'

'Thank you,' I say.

‘Is this your son?’

‘Normally at school on a Monday.’ Could she mind him while I’m inside the courtroom? Between soothing jittery witnesses – no, that won’t work. ‘Don’t worry, he won’t be coming in with me.’

‘Bit young for work experience.’

I summon a laugh.

Her voice changes gear. ‘Children can’t enter the building.’

‘I know. I have someone coming. They’ll wait outside together,’ I say. She nods, approving, while I feel increasingly shaky. ‘A friend.’ I gesture to my mobile phone as though it is proof, as though the received calls are not all from Elliot’s doctor and his school; the text messages more personal than automated alerts from my bank. What am I going to do with him?

Two minutes until the trial starts. I thought this would happen one day, but not on my first court booking since fostering Elliot, not on such a significant case. A case which, if I don’t go inside, could be adjourned. This crime that has the nation gripped with its themes of class and privilege, a luxury car and a dead baby. They need the best interpreter. They need me.

I look at my phone again in case a miracle might occur, his teacher calling to apologise for the confusion, she’ll be here to whisk him back to school any second now.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ I say to the volunteer.

‘Your friend isn’t here?’

‘I should be in there already. But my son was sent home from school.’ My pleading tone tells her the friend was never coming.

‘Good morning, stranger.’ I hear a familiar voice from behind.

‘Arkam,’ I say, turning around. ‘Hello.’ He’s one of the few court-house security guards whose name I know.

‘Multi-tasking this morning, eh?’ He grins into Elliot’s face.

‘I’m trying but . . .’

‘No children inside,’ he says gently.

‘Exactly.’

‘I can watch him for a bit. Don’t tell anyone,’ Arkam winks.

Right before Elliot, I worked here on a three-month murder trial. Interpreting almost feels, briefly, like a normal job on those lengthy cases; going to the same place each day, seeing the same people.

‘Thank you. You’re saving my life.’

‘No problem.’

‘I don’t know what I would have done. This is Elliot. He has some things in his rucksack to keep him occupied.’ I slip my mobile into his pocket.

‘A cupcake after this, I promise,’ I tell Elliot. Then, in a more serious tone: ‘Be good, yeah?’ The parental need to set boundaries and teach manners, when all I really want is to get him to like me. ‘Love you.’

‘Love you,’ Elliot replies. I try to forget a previous foster parent taught him to say it by rote while I walk towards the wooden doors.

The jury looks exhausted. In the public gallery, the grief-stricken, groups of law students and the plain nosy sit staring straight ahead, at the floor or at the ceiling. This is a rare place on earth that does not allow the distraction of mobile phones. In summer, even the new courts can be sweaty and oppressive, sometimes unbearably so. Now sighs and sniffles of the alleged victim’s family members spread through the room before we fall into silence.

The day begins. It’s a complex dangerous-driving case. Immediately, my eyes occupy themselves with the defence barrister’s hands. Back straight, chin raised, he limits his hand movements to open, relaxed gestures. ‘How would you describe what you saw that evening?’ Everything about him expresses authority, honesty.

Seated next to the smartly dressed witness, I inhale the room’s stale leather and stagnant air as I wait for my turn to speak.

‘Who made the call to emergency services?’

The thirty-something woman answers the barrister’s questions

succinctly and it's no trouble interpreting her Italian into English. She can understand English well enough and doesn't really need me to repeat the questions into her native tongue.

'How would you describe the sound?'

As I interpret the questions and answers from Italian to English, English to Italian, I keep my eyes on the barrister's palms, his clean pink flesh without one trace of sweat.

The woman I'm interpreting for, a tourist visiting London last June, attended the opera on the night of the alleged crime. Out of sheer bad luck she saw the incident take place and is here to provide evidence, summoned by the defence.

'And what did you see when you stepped closer?'

After *Madame Butterfly*, my witness returned to her rental car in the opera house carpark and saw the defendant reverse her £150,000 Mercedes SUV, hitting a member of the catering staff. Then the defendant drove off. The charges include dangerous driving, failing to stop at the scene of an accident, and child destruction – the victim survived, but her five-month unborn baby did not. The witness statement from the Italian tourist apparently supports the defence claim that from inside her very large car, the accused was not aware that she had hit anyone, much less someone who was pregnant. Ignorance, it seems, is the best defence when the charge is failing to stop. The press, titillated by this case and its glamorous fifty-year-old accused, heiress to an energy company and a Knightsbridge resident, is predicting an acquittal on the gravest charge of child destruction. Legally speaking, it is almost impossible to prove; rarely is anyone convicted of killing an unborn child. I let my eyes rest on the defendant. She is in a dark navy suit with tiny earrings which reflect the light when her head turns. I could not stand to listen to the radio in the cab this morning because I knew they were going to say she'll go free.

Some cases I work on, I really can't tell which way the jury or judge is likely to go. Today, my being here seems futile. The defence team

appear so assured – my guess is they hardly need this witness to bolster their case. And now in the final days of the trial, the prosecution barrister is visibly struggling to hide his gloom. But you never know when things might turn around. My witness could fluff one of her answers, wobble off course and do more harm to the defence than good. Though that probably won't happen.

'At what point did you notice the woman was pregnant?' I repeat the question in Italian with complete accuracy. Then the answer into English. To me, the words must all taste the same. I will say whatever is demanded of me. In this room, I have no personal morals of my own. I am not really here. That's what I have to tell myself. Some days, during some assignments, I need reminding, until the reality of my job really sinks in. I bet the accused gets away with everything except for the dangerous-driving charge. But I am not allowed to care.

It's now twenty minutes since I left Elliot.

The questions keep coming. Twenty-five minutes since I left Elliot. He has my phone, and knows how to use it, but who would he call? I recall the earlier scroll through my contacts list and mentally pause on the letter D: these days, it's blank. But there's no use dwelling on what-ifs.

Should the prosecution question the witness for even half as long as the defence, I'll be stuck in court for almost an hour. What if Arkam has to leave his post? Someone may have already called social services about the boy dumped in the Old Bailey with the world's filthiest soft toy.

Cross-examination begins and I rush my sentences, the Italian words colliding, saving a few seconds of time.

'No further questions, my Lord,' the barrister says. 'The witness is dismissed.'

My pumps skid along the floor.

Recess. The court spills into the foyer, everyone desperate for the

loo, a drink of water or a surreptitious Walnut Whip. Through the crush I head for the building exit.

‘Where did you learn Italian? Your accent is very good.’ The witness has inserted herself into my eyeline.

‘Thank you.’ I avoid eye contact. I need to go outside. I have to find him.

‘Have you been to Vomero, in Naples?’ The woman beams. ‘My home town.’

‘No.’

‘The pizza is the best in the country.’

I crane my neck to see past the woman’s middle. Through the doorway I can see a group of people right by the exit, but no sign of Elliot.

‘You should visit,’ the woman says. ‘They’ll think you’re Italian.’

‘Excuse me.’ I dart past her, push through tight circles of onlookers and officials until I reach the spot where I left Elliot and Arkam.

They’re gone.

2.

I need to find Elliot, but a man steps in front of me and clutches my elbow. ‘I noticed you in there,’ he says. ‘I heard everything you said.’ I recognise him from the newspapers and the magazine covers in Tesco. His eyes look faded, as if drawn onto his emaciated face with pale watercolours. He probably hasn’t eaten anything solid since his partner was injured and his unborn child died.

‘I’m very sorry for your loss.’ I regret my choice of words – it’s a stock phrase he probably hears ten times a day. What else can I say? Really I shouldn’t be speaking to him at all.

‘“It was *dark*,”’ he’s imitating the defendant’s voice. ‘“Perhaps I brushed against a parked car. Certainly not a *person*.”’

His partner lost their baby, the ability to conceive again and the permanent use of both of her legs. The life they had planned gone in an instant. I think of the Georgian word for being pregnant which translates to “having two souls”. There’s a Polish phrase for pregnancy equivalent to “you are at hope” in English. Maybe they’ll adopt? They might feel too broken after this. The process can be gruelling and adoption doesn’t guarantee a happy ending. I am queasy at the thought of Elliot’s whereabouts. ‘It isn’t true – what you said in there,’ he’s shaking his head. ‘You’re a *liar*.’

Is he bilingual? My stomach flips. He’s suggesting that I mistranslated some of the evidence.

‘Sir, I assure you I interpreted with complete accuracy.’ What word is he talking about? There was nothing particularly challenging about the testimony; nothing which could be misconstrued. Other interpreters do a tidy-up. They leave out the background “ahhs”, the

“hmmms”; a passive phrase becomes active because it’s easier – they’re not a slave to the code of conduct; they don’t see the point. But I never do this. I made one mistake, one solitary error earlier in my career, and it will never happen again. The price is too high.

His eyes pinball from me to the ceiling. The man in front of me is disorientated and needs help but I must get to Elliot. I release my arm from his grip and spin on my heel. I need to find another security guard who’ll know where Arkam is.

‘Arkam?’ I call. ‘ELLIOT!’ The terror in my voice attracts attention. ‘Have you seen a six-year-old boy? Blonde curly hair, wearing a school uniform?’ I say to everyone within earshot. ‘Elliot!’

‘You’re a mother.’ The alleged victim’s husband reappears. ‘Do you work for child killers too?’

‘I work for the courts. I’m not *with* the defence today, I promise you.’ We terps are often mistaken for members of the defence team, but I am freelance, I don’t work for anyone. My assignments come through Exia Translation and Interpreting Services, which holds the current contract with the Ministry of Justice.

‘If a paedophile needs an interpreter do you help them? Say their lies for them and watch them get away with it?’

Their lies. He isn’t challenging my translation, he’s talking about the client. He’s barely even looking at me now. He’s angry and hurt and doesn’t know what to do with it. I’m a good target precisely because he knows I’m not to blame, like the hedge fund manager who loses a million pounds on a bad trade and screams at the guy who makes his sandwich. But I can’t deal with this while I’m trying to find Elliot.

I turn my back on him and call: ‘ELLIOT!’ There. To the left of the exit. A staff member. I run towards another security guard.

‘Found him,’ a low voice from behind stops me in my tracks. ‘He’s out there with your *friends*.’ Through the crowd I see past the exit a blur of Elliot’s rucksack and then his face, cheerfully munching

through a packet of crisps. I turn to thank my helper and see that it's him again: the husband of the alleged victim.

'Oh gosh, *thank you*,' I say.

Elliot is standing outside with two women, one of them crouching at his height, smiling as he chews. She dabs his mouth with a tissue then straightens up in her dark navy suit. The defendant. Elliot is with the heiress, the hit-and-run driver. Now the bereaved father is watching this cosy scene, with that woman's hands on my son.

'You're not on the side of the defence today, yeah?' The man is muttering to himself, but I know he means for me to hear.

'This isn't what it looks like; they're not my friends,' I tell him. 'That's my son, but I don't know them. I'm impartial, sir, I assure you.'

It can be difficult for people to see us as neutral. In court, we sit knee-to-knee with the person we're interpreting for. We lean close and whisper into their ear. If the client is the defendant, we sit beside them in the dock, the two of us squashed together like co-conspirators, sealed off in the Perspex box for everyone else's safety.

'You're corrupt,' he's saying under his breath. 'You're all corrupt.' His fists pummel his forehead until a woman, a friend or relative, drapes her arm over his shoulder. I don't think this man would hurt anyone deliberately but he has the quality of little-left-to-lose and that makes him dangerous. I rush towards Elliot and, as I go, turn back to check he isn't following me.

'Elliot, where did you go? Where's Arkam?' my anger towards the security guard cuts through my voice.

'I'm sorry!' one of the women says. 'I knew the second we moved, court would come out and you'd be looking for us,' she sounds breathless. 'Elliot needed the toilet. They won't let children in the court building so I took him to a café. I hope you weren't very worried.' My hand around Elliot's is slick with sweat, my heart not yet returned to normal pace. Arkam should not have let Elliot go off with a stranger under any circumstances. What was he thinking?

‘I’m sorry I had to leave you,’ I tell Elliot, squeezing his hand tighter. ‘I won’t do it again.’

‘I’m Sandra,’ the woman says. ‘I was speaking to the guard and Elliot while I was waiting for my boss.’ She looks towards the defendant, who has drifted a few yards away from us, now talking to her barrister and solicitors.

A male solicitor in a blue shirt speaks rapidly to the heiress. From here, I can’t make out what he’s saying, but I can tell she isn’t listening; her eyes roam the outdoor space, as though trapped in a tedious conversation at a party, scoping for someone better. I saw her on the telly last night, exiting the court tall and proud, not the usual bashful defendant holding a jacket over their face to hide from the cameras. She’s not embarrassed, it’s there in her body language. No humility about the death and destruction she’s caused. I think she’s looking for the cameras, that’s why she’s loitering by the entrance. She’s confident of an acquittal and this case has made her famous.

‘I’m Revelle,’ I say, realising I haven’t told this woman my name. ‘Thank you for looking after him, Sandra.’

‘We kept each other company, didn’t we?’ Sandra squats to Elliot’s level and they exchange a smile.

‘Yeah,’ Elliot agrees. I like that she hasn’t commented on his appearance. So many strangers consider it appropriate to note the vast differences in our looks. ‘It’s so light, it’s practically white!’ they say, fingering his hair. ‘Don’t worry, it’ll darken like yours once he gets older,’ or, once, comparing us: ‘His father must be practically albino!’ Maybe he is.

‘If you ever want a babysitter for real,’ Sandra’s voice breaks through my thoughts, ‘I’m on Silver Balloon – do you use it? The childminding app. Sandra Ramos. Though I’m only free Sundays because the rest of the week I work for—’ she dips her head towards the heiress.

‘You work seven days?’ I ask.

‘That’s why I’m in the UK. To work. And looking after lovely children isn’t work, actually.’

‘Thanks for the tip about the app. As you can see, I don’t have my childminding sorted.’

Elliot is holding a piece of paper up to my face. ‘What’s this?’

‘It’s me,’ he says. ‘Sandra drew it when we were waiting.’

It’s a pencil sketch of Elliot. Sandra shrugs. ‘I like to draw. It gets me off Facebook.’ I don’t know much about art, but it’s very good.

‘You’re really talented,’ I tell her. ‘Elliot, you said thank you, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’ She’s captured his big eyes and accentuated the thick waves of his hair.

From the corner of my eye I see the heiress approach us and Sandra gestures for Elliot to tuck the picture down by his side.

‘David Hockney strikes again,’ the heiress says, sniggering at her own joke. Hockney was primarily a painter, even I know this. If she’s going to be mean, she could at least come up with a better reference. The heiress looks at me and there is a beat before she says: ‘You were our interpreter in there. Thank you.’ *Our*.

I give a half-smile and nod. Of course she thinks I work for her. Over the years, I’ve had many defendants strike up conversation as though I were a trusted confidante on the defence team. They’ve told me all about their wife’s job, their brother’s stocks and shares portfolio, asking my opinion on their mother’s ailments. Once, a particularly chatty Spanish client loved discussing the problems with London transport – he was a town planner in a previous life – and one morning in the dock, I agreed the tube was bad that day and accidentally mentioned my stop. Then an accused double murderer knew roughly where I lived. I was relieved to see him convicted.

‘Let’s go!’ the heiress says to Sandra, clapping her hands together. Up close, I can see her hair is in an intricate braid, like a little girl’s. It’s impossible to do that kind of hairstyle on yourself. Did she make Sandra do it for her this morning? What type of work does she do for her? I wonder.

‘Where’s the car? HELLO?’ Then she stalks away and it is clear that Sandra is supposed to scurry after her.

I raise my eyebrows in a gesture of solidarity. ‘What a lovely boss you have there.’

‘I hope she loses this case,’ Sandra whispers, putting a finger to her lips. ‘I’ve got to go. Bye, Elliot!’

Sandra is gone, and I promise myself that I will never let Elliot out of my sight like that again.

At home, we look for a place for Sandra’s drawing. Elliot wants it in prime position, stuck to the door of his wardrobe, the first thing he sees of a morning when he wakes up. He’s obviously feeling better and hopefully will be happy to go back to school tomorrow. His hand dives deep into the biscuit tin and now my tablet is pressed against his nose, playing cartoons. He is calm and focussed, content to entertain himself, which I know can’t be said of all children his age. I wonder how much of his personality is down to inherited genes. Is his self-containment a coping mechanism from his earlier years, survival by tuning out what’s happening around you? I know there were substance abuse issues in the birth family, before he was taken into care. I have a folder from our social worker, Lydia, with various forms and reports which tell the story of his background. I’ve read some of them, I’m aware of the major problems, but I stopped short of reading the details of every police visit, every troubling episode between his parents. I realise Elliot isn’t coming to me as a blank slate but if I know each detail of his family life and what he experienced, I’ll treat him differently. I know I will. Like a tragic social services case to be fixed instead of a real child. My child. I don’t want to watch him eat dinner and read trauma in his every gesture, obsess over which behaviours are manifestations of what prior experience. This is his second chance. So the folder is there in the locked bottom drawer of my desk and I guess I’ll decide how old he should be before I give it to him, if he wants to read it for himself.

Did Elliot mention to Sandra today that I wasn't his real mother? He told a woman on the bus the other day who leaned across the aisle to compliment his NASA T-shirt. He does call me Mum. The first day he came to me, Lydia told me to expect it. Some adopted children take years to call their new parents Mum and Dad, and some never do at all. Elliot was famously quick to offer it up with all of his previous foster carers. It's an attachment thing. Of course I like hearing him say it. I wish the social worker hadn't told me he uses it with everyone.

'How are you going there, do you need anything?' I ruffle Elliot's hair. He shakes his head 'no' without raising his eyes from the screen.

While Elliot is busy I should do something useful like laundry, I decide. The adoption agency provides advice about the practical side of taking a child from the care system, but no one tells you how to do the very basics of parenting. Suddenly in charge of a six-year-old, I am scrambling to catch up, without experience or help. I look at the overflowing laundry basket and sort through Elliot's clothes. The first T-shirt has a band of grass stains down the bottom, his black trousers caked with splotches of mud. Normal mothers would know what to do with this, with baby and toddler years to draw upon. Hot water for these types of stains, cold for those. On my laptop I search "grass stain removal" and open tab after tab. As I read, my eyes keep dropping down to my forearm, the red finger-marks of the bereaved father in court long faded but I can still feel them, or imagine that I can. There is one visible scratch in the skin but I think my own nails did that, in the panic to find Elliot.

I follow the advice of a mummy blogger from outside Toronto who claims to be an authority on mixing mimosas and all types of laundry. One part distilled white vinegar to one part water. Soak for thirty minutes, then rub and rinse. Repeat. Do I have any vinegar? How do I know if it's distilled? I think of how it would sting to drip some onto the scratch mark on my arm. Three months in, and already I almost lost Elliot. If I hadn't found him within the next couple of minutes, I would have gone to the police. They would have issued a

special alert and maybe they would have found Elliot within a few hours, but only to return him to the adoption agency to be given to someone else. I instal the Silver Balloon app on my phone and find Sandra Ramos. This is what I'm looking for: her childminder profile has dozens of glowing reviews. I'm somewhat reassured that my recklessness today in leaving him with the security guard wasn't as risky as it could have been.

I place all of Elliot's clothes into the front loader and select the longest, hottest wash cycle.

What must that bereaved man at court think of me? His unborn baby is tragically killed while here's me, an unfit mother with a healthy child I clearly don't deserve; it's unfair. He's convinced the whole thing is unfair – the trial, that I was working for the callous heiress, but in that respect, I did nothing wrong. He is right about one thing – I *would* interpret for a child killer, an accused paedophile, if required. Interpreters turn up to each booking often with no idea as to the content of the case. We might not even know who we're speaking for – victim or accused or witness or a member of the victim's shattered family. We can't walk out in the middle of a police interview or court case because we decide we don't want to help our guilty client. We must swallow every reservation and keep going. If you find yourself disturbed, take your revulsion home and sort it out on your own time. I know that's how it needs to be. If I was ever on the other side of the justice system I would expect pure professionalism from all involved.

When the washing machine stops, one of Elliot's shirts emerges shrunk to half its original size. The grass stains are as vivid as before.

The next morning London churns with news that the jury from the dangerous-driving trial has retired to consider its verdict. On the walk to the hospital, I switch my phone from Radio 1 to Spotify. I want music only, and no chance of hearing about the heiress and thinking about the bereaved father.

St Thomas': a public hospital with a five-star London view. I'm taking the stairs, gazing at Westminster Bridge and the twirling pods of the Eye. After signing in, I write REVELLE LEE on a visitor's name tag and head for Cardiology. A Russian-speaking man is being treated for heart disease and my own chest flutters as I approach the nurse's desk. Medical assignments aren't my preference. Once I had to tell a man that his wife was dying and by the time I got the words out in Hindi, she was already gone. There's a sense with police and court work that justice might happen, the wrong might somehow be corrected and the person at fault given their dues. With health there's no one to blame. Who can you punish when the villain is your own body?

In the ward, I'm presented to a man – clammy, his face leached of colour. He's happy to see me, relieved to express in his first language just how rough he feels. The doctor in front of me thinks the Russian man's condition isn't serious. I repeat this for the client and he raises his hands to the heavens in relief. In conversational Russian, the same word is used for the human arm and hand – potentially dangerous in some settings. I think of the British woman living in Italy who had an unnecessary mastectomy last year after her medical notes from Wales were mistranslated. A Spanish man in Scotland had the wrong kidney removed after the interpreter made a mistake on the medical consent form.

The consultation with the cardiologist ends and I head home. I go grocery shopping on the way and after the bags are unpacked in the kitchen, I make an appointment for Elliot to have his hair cut. When I collect him from school, he is full of stories about one teacher's broken tooth and another's fractured arm and how the two must be connected in some funny way, and for the whole evening, I do not think about work. We have dinner and watch a game show and after Elliot goes to bed, the TV is still on in the background while I check my emails. I have forgotten about the result of the hit-and-run trial. I'm happy. But then the late news comes on.

Not guilty.

Not guilty on the major charge of child destruction. The heiress will pay a fine and serve a community sentence for the dangerous driving and fleeing the scene, but that's all. I keep the television sound low to avoid waking Elliot. The defendant's expressionless face fills the screen; the smooth-as-silk defence barrister stands next to her, smug. A ripple in the newsreader's voice betrays the disgust she hasn't entirely left in the dressing room. To what extent did testimony from the Italian tourist affect the outcome? I wonder. When the bereaved father comes on the screen, ghostly and hollowed-out, I hit the standby button before his eyes can reach me. I try to scrub him and the case from my mind, scramble the words and flush them away.

I hope she loses this case. I'm reminded of what Sandra said just before we parted ways at the Old Bailey. Why would she say that about her employer, in such a serious trial? Sandra must think the woman is guilty of all charges. People like the heiress often reveal themselves in front of their staff; their true self pokes through the mannered facade with waiters, drivers, cleaners – anyone they think is not worth the performance. Sandra probably knows that woman, and what she's capable of, better than anyone.

I should have had a complete news blackout this week. Ordinarily with a court assignment, I pop in on the relevant day, interpret for the person who requires it and I'm onto my next job by the time the trial concludes. Unless the client is the defendant, I'm usually not there for the verdict; the outcome of the trial is none

of my business. Early on, I learnt to stop being curious. I can't control the result, so I let it go. But when it's a case like this, how can I avoid hearing about it?

Sleep for me feels out of the question and so I take the opportunity to sort my court invoices for this financial year. There isn't a great deal of information in the documents, a variation on *Southwark Crown Court, 5th June, R v Fernandez*; I need to unspool my memory to recall details of each job. Here's one I remember: invoice #38575 – I attended a police station in East London to interpret for a Portuguese tourist who found human remains in Walthamstow Wetlands. I vaguely remember reading news reports at the time about the foot belonging to a missing Bethnal Green woman. I never heard whether or not anyone was arrested. I can't even remember reading the woman's name.

Into Google I type various combinations of “foot-found-Walthamstow-Wetlands” to locate the case. An article in *The Telegraph* says an East London man was being held for the murder of a twenty-eight-year-old woman. My eyes scroll to the end of the story: charges dropped, suspect released, the case seemingly cold. I spent six hours that day speaking for the Portuguese tourist, describing his discovery, his shock, his fear, the sick that rushed to his throat when he realised what was in front of him (a human foot, female-looking) and what that meant, and it never occurred to me afterwards to learn whether or not they found the killer. It can't occur to me. I do my job, I say the words, and I go home. I need to remember that. I know the cruel details of court cases will stay with me if I'm not careful. They will gather inside, slow poison accumulating, like sucking lead from the end of a pencil. So I am careful: I am Teflon. The words I interpret travel straight from my ear to mouth, said and gone without leaving a trace. I repeat the words without metabolising them, swallow sentences whole and try to make sure they never touch the sides. Even though I speak in first-person, recounting every story, every action,

event, fear and feeling of the client as “I, I, I”, said as though we are one and the same.

Another memory drops into view. A rape-murder case from a few years ago, a teenage girl killed in her own home. The accused, the girl’s neighbour, nominated his Polish-speaking boss as a character witness and I was hired by the defence to interpret. The man spoke convincingly of his employee’s good character, but even so, the evidence seemed considerable and surely the accused is in prison now. My computer flashes “low battery” and I scramble to connect the cord. “Old-Bailey-teenage-girl-rape-murder”. Page one, two of Google. So many rape-murders but not the one I’m looking for. Page three, four. An image by the court artist; I recognise the defendant’s smirk.

Acquitted.

Step away from the laptop, I tell myself. This is not helping anything. I know it’s only a matter of statistics, a coincidence these particular cases were not-guilty verdicts. Sometimes justice wins, sometimes it doesn’t. They could have been innocent. I need to find *one* case which resulted in a conviction, and then I’ll stop.

A motorbike roars past the building, the engine an explosion against the stillness of the night. Last year I was summoned after midnight to interpret for a Russian-speaking Estonian woman chased through the residential streets of Muswell Hill by a man on a moped. In the North London police station, she spoke English extremely well but the terror of the incident caused her mind to withdraw, to take refuge in her primary language. “Muswell-Hill-moped-sex-attacker”. I find it.

Guilty.

There.

I did that. I didn’t work for the victim. I was neutral, but I helped to create a detailed statement, a specific and clear witness account, and I was part of the group of people who convicted this man and got

justice done. But this follow-up, this interest in the verdict, cannot become my habit.

The television is off now. I make a diary entry about the hit-and-run case so that later I can check I've been paid correctly. Then my hands close the book shut.

On the Exia app I scroll through the available interpreting jobs for the rest of the week. There are a number of hearings taking place outside London – the city's courts are still drowning in backlog from the pandemic and subsequent barrister strikes – but I don't want to travel too far and risk being home late for Elliot. On Sunday they need someone for a business conference in Watford. That could be good, something easy and bland; just what I need after today and, crucially, a much higher hourly rate than court work. It would mean giving up a weekend day with Elliot, the first since he's been with me. But it would be worth it if the higher rate allowed me to then be more choosy about my weekday assignments, and helped to ensure I always get to Elliot's school in time for pick-up. I switch to the Silver Balloon app and check that Sandra Ramos is available for this Sunday. She is, and I book her in. I need to work, and that means leaving my son with people, and she has already proven herself with Elliot. I'll do the business conference. Maybe I'll get to translate some bad scripted jokes from the MC. It might even be fun.

As it nears one o'clock in the morning, I'm still too restless to sleep. I have sedatives in a drawer somewhere but I don't want to be too knocked out and not hear Elliot if he calls me during the night. I load a Russian film on my laptop and set the subtitles to Italian; two language practice sessions for the price of one, and it'll force me to concentrate and stop thinking about today. Back on the app, I accept an assignment tomorrow morning at a legal chambers in central London – it's simpler than going in to court – and settle in to watch the film.

There. I can't help but feel a burst of satisfaction that it didn't get past me. On the screen I spy a mistake in the Russian to Italian