

FICTION

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Towards Midnight

WHEN THE ANIMAL RIGHTS PEOPLE got going, Jim Lever and his colleagues at the university were taught how to check their cars. It was a simple procedure, one never to be departed from, to be carried out inconspicuously, with an appearance of casualness, as though one were looking for an orange which had escaped from one's shopping bag, or for loose change, just spilled. Wherever possible, the public was not to be disturbed. 'Wherever possible,' Jim soon realised, meant 'never.' The public was never to be worried, and in the event of an explosion was to be told some comforting tale about a gas mains or petrol leak.

They spent a whole morning being instructed, a few hours after that practising. The driver's side first, calmly round the front to the passenger's side, then, ducking down easily as though in search of the fallen fruit. Or it could be done in the course of pretending to check the tires. However it was done, it was to be done preferably during a pause or lull in the pedestrian traffic. Without drawing attention to themselves, in fact, they were to wait for such pauses.

It was up to the individual scientist whether he involved his family or not. Those with young children tended not to; those with older children came clean, on the whole. But where the wives too were drivers or had their own cars, they had to be told, for they also were targets. It was the responsibility of the husbands to show the wives how to carry out the procedure, not ever to make light of the necessity, to tell the story, if they thought fit, of the researcher in a red brick English university who had been blown to bits one morning in front of his family, waving goodbye to him from an upstairs window. Or it was the responsibility of the wife to involve the husband, where she was the researcher. Or the son or daughter the parents. To tell or not to tell, to learn to endure the necessity, to find ways—for didn't the activists depend on just such moments of forgetfulness?—of not forgetting to check your vehicle. Immediately you allowed yourself to think

that it was a reasonable and honourable world, they would strike, denying then that it was they who did evil. The evil, they declared, came with the researchers, their unforgivable, unspeakable work. Search no further than them for the darkness therefore.

For Jim, there had been no dilemma. His daughter, Rosie, had been ten at the time and his wife, Louise, was of a very nervous disposition, easily alarmed, hard to reassure. He had said nothing for years. Then, one day, after a discussion in school, Rosie had asked him whether, given the sort of work he did, he checked his car before driving off. Or—this with the sweet officiousness of youth—if he didn't, he oughtn't to start doing so. He had answered that he had been doing it for years, possibly would have to do it for the rest of his life. As he spoke he held his daughter's hands, at once to try and assure her that there was nothing to worry about really and to prepare her for the request he was about to make—that she say nothing about it to her mother. Even as he was having it, he realised that it was not a conversation he would forget. The way Rosie was regarding him: suspiciously, with some traces of disenchantment even, but also with love, a great directness.

"You mean, Dad, Mum doesn't know? She doesn't know!? How come?"

"I've never told her. I didn't want to alarm her. You know how she is."

"She may be neurotic," Rosie said, "but she's not a fool. She reads the newspapers, watches documentaries on TV, has opinions. How come it hasn't occurred to her that people like you are at risk? I don't understand."

"I don't think I understand either."

"Oh, come on! You must have an idea! She's your wife."

"Let's say I have the beginnings of an idea then. Here goes. There's a limit to the number of fears even a normal person can have without going under. Certainly this is true of neurotics. Somehow they sense this and manage to keep the number of fears constant. In their case, of course, many of the fears are groundless, imaginary. They prefer such fears to real fears, in fact. They haven't the stomach for real fears but play about with these imaginary ones, moving them about as though on a board, like chessmen, one fear one day, another one the next. If you look at your mother's fears, most of them are like that. She guards herself against real fears, which is to say she'll never suspect my job has risks attached as well as ... a salary!"

By the time he had finished speaking, Rosie had tears in her eyes, not in the way in which, quite often, her mother had—threateningly, hysterically, her eyes seeming to bulge and come out at you—but out of simple relief

and gratitude that so much had at last been explained to her. And if Jim also had tears in his eyes, it was not just because his dark-haired fourteen-year-old daughter looked especially beautiful, it was because he knew that without her candour and passionate curiosity he wouldn't have been able to clear the air—so long morbid and unhealthy, a settled discomfort—with his explanations.

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Of course, it was easier to check your car if you were strong and healthy, as Jim was, rather than overweight and short of breath, like his colleague and friend, John Anderson. Occasionally, if there was no one about, Jim would do a few press-ups by the car, slow press-ups, sometimes press-ups on his fingertips. The smells of dust and cats and petrol and oil didn't really spoil such moments. He still had the strength to exert himself, to relish the tautness and readiness of his body, appreciate its astonishing resources and reserves. Checking the car could be an occasion for a miniature workout, therefore. The thought of them, the pleasure he took in them, a way of remembering that you never just got into your car and drove off. As John Anderson was sometimes inclined to do, in his tired obesity taking a chance he knew he should never take. He would try to make a joke of it, saying that because when he got down he found it hard to get up, he sometimes decided not to get down at all.

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One year, in October—Rosie seventeen now—they had been away for a week, the three of them, staying in a cottage in the highlands. Now Jim and Rosie were back, having dropped Louise off with her sister and brother-in-law on the way home. Rosie had school the next day and Jim was impatient to get to his laboratory to check on the course of an experiment.

He would go to the lab as soon as he could, later that evening, if need be, past midnight even. Without appearing to brush his daughter aside on this last day of her holidays, he would go there. It had been an impromptu experiment, decided on while he waited for the results of another one, and he was peculiarly eager to see how it was going.

He had taken three groups of white rats, a control group and two others, rats of various ages in each group, and injected the test groups with different substances, each potentially carcinogenic. That had been fifteen days ago, and although there might be nothing to show for it yet, you could never be sure. How fast a tumour grew depended on what kind of tumour

it was and you couldn't know in advance what kind of tumour was going to appear. Fifteen days in a laboratory could be a long time or hardly any time at all, a time of revelation or of irritating inconsequence. Somewhat as the laboratory in which Jim spent so much of his time could seem exhilarating one day, emptiness itself the next.

Quite often, when he was not in the lab, he would imagine himself there. He would see himself entering it, talking to colleagues, getting down to work, losing himself in it utterly. And waiting, always waiting. All the years of his research he seemed to have been waiting, whether for one climactically revealing result or for a commanding synthesis out of all his experiments, he couldn't have said. However much success he had had, it hadn't lessened the sense of waiting. He had never understood why.

Actually being in the laboratory, he had found, was easier than being in it in his imagination. In his imagination it was inclined to have dark corners and odd shadows and an air of the illicit and the underhand which it absolutely did not have when he was there, busy about his work. If occasionally this troubled him, he would recall the words of an old professor: "Researcher's guilt. We're stuck with it. Shoulders back and keep going. Don't let it get to you. Put it behind you."

In his dreams at night the place would be different again, a dark cell in which he could hardly move or a vast, pleasantly lit domain in which white rats the size of humans gambolled fearlessly, or, larger than humans, stood up on their hind legs to interrogate them. Diminutive in white coat and surgical gloves, he would feel himself to be without will or justification. Then again the rats could be extremely amiable, making a place for him in the straw, apologizing for their tumours, for their missing limbs or eyes or mouths, begging him to continue with his experiments, even showing him a better way of doing so, a quicker way to the heart of the matter. (However terrible their disfigurement, in these dreams the rats were never less than rats—never less than humans, Jim was nearly tempted to say.)

So it was quite often with a mixture of hope and apprehension that he approached the laboratory. He would be there by now but for Rosie. At least, he would be checking his car by now but for his daughter, this discussion they were having, a discussion he was trying very hard to keep from becoming a quarrel just as she, he suspected, was trying very hard to turn it into one. The facts before him had an altogether darker meaning than he was prepared to admit, apparently. Her youthful conception of the truth meant that there was more work to be done. She was glaring at him, demanding a concentration he was too weary or too preoccupied or too unhappy to give. His intelligence and his ardour, if they were anywhere, were with his rats, in the half light.

Rosie was sitting at the kitchen table, school books before her, as she always did when angry, tugging at the curls on her forehead. Jim was standing, wedged in a corner.

"I can't understand why she's so idle," Rosie said, her gaze appearing to be trained on some remote object. "She acts as if it would be positively bad for her to exert herself in any way. She behaves like an invalid. Is she an invalid? Is there something you're keeping from me, cancer or something? I want to hear."

"No, there's nothing like that," Jim replied. "But frequently she thinks she is ill. She goes for tests. The results are always negative."

"She goes for tests?"

"Yes. She went for some recently. It goes in cycles. I can tell when one is starting, but I can't do anything about it. As well try to resist a force of nature. Fear overcomes her. She starts to imagine symptoms, creates them actually, pains, swellings, nausea, faintness."

"How dreadfully boring for you," Rosie said, making a clicking noise with her tongue. "But it's not as if she's just pathetic: she can be so nasty, so"

"Fear again. It's not so much boring, though, as distressing," Jim said, finding once again that in conversation with his daughter he couldn't always be entirely honest.

"Last week in the cottage she really pissed me off," Rosie said loudly, as though, in this matter of her mother, she now had good reasons for considering herself the most reliable witness. "She sat there doing nothing—or reading those books which are so bad that reading them is worse than doing nothing—nagging me about the family tree project! I said I'd almost finished it but she didn't believe me. What was that like? I mean, were we not supposed to be on holiday!?"

"I know, sweetheart," Jim answered, understanding that her distress was no longer caused by particular things her mother had done—an oversight here, an irritability there—but by the fact of her, the kind of person she was, or had allowed herself to become. "If I'm not up to schedule with my grant application and you with your homework, she gets anxious, and that makes her harsh, demanding, unreasonable"

"I'll say! What I want to know, though, is how you've been able to bear it for so long?"

"She wasn't always like this. When I first met her she wasn't."

"Oh? She was happily balanced and outgoing"

"Not exactly. But not as she is now. I'd no idea, when I married her, that she would become ... so damaged by fear, so disfigured. I'm very sorry."

For a moment, Rosie was silent. Jim thought that the discussion might be over at last and that within the hour he might be in his laboratory, examining his rats. But suddenly, banging her fist on the table, she asked—quite as though it was for the first time too—why he had married Louise and how he had been able to bear it for so many years. They were not the sorts of questions a daughter was supposed to ask her father, he thought; but he thought also that it was a measure of her distress that she was doing so. Guiltily he began to gather himself for an answer, not knowing how it would sound, whether he would be able to manage one at all.

He had stepped out from the corner and, as though gesture could induce and inform speech, was gesturing excitedly, nervously, circular movements now with the one hand, now with the other, now with both.

As in the quiet of honest reminiscence, he was suddenly still.

“I loved her. I saw in her sensitivity rather than anxiety. I appreciated the way she took an interest in me, in my plans, hopes. I liked her kindness, for she was kind then. I liked her sense of fun and adventure. We used to go climbing together. She was a great walker. She loved flowers.”

Rosie shrugged her shoulders as if to say that, if he said so, who was she to disagree? Who was she to ask why her mother had gone bad, in later years?

She turned away, wrapped in silence.

“How is the family tree project?” Jim asked. “Can I have a look?”

“Just about done. But peculiar. See”

Without turning, she flipped two large sheets of paper across the table.

What he saw was that whereas Louise’s tree had been traced back to early Tudor times, the stages in her line deftly emphasised in various colours, century by century until she appeared in the world, child of elderly parents, on 23 January 1958, his own line petered out at the end of the seventeenth century, in the Restoration period—or stopped like a path at the edge of a cliff, was the thought he had. An Alfred Lever had married a Sissy Macgregor but it wasn’t known apparently who his parents were. Rosie had drawn lines downwards into a shaded area, an area similar to those on weather maps that indicate rain. To left and right of this she had placed large question marks in red ink.

“So,” Jim said, a hand on his daughter’s shoulder, “you can’t trace me any further back?”

“I’m afraid not,” she said. “It seems you end in darkness.”



He suspected that Rosie was watching him as he checked his car in the street outside. Probably he now stood revealed to her as one who had married without understanding what he was doing. A devoted daughter, not given to casualness, she would be looking to see that he checked the car as if here at least he knew what he was doing.

Peering with his torch behind each wheel, he felt himself suspected of some general incompetence. The discussion had unsettled him, left him with a sense of the possible absurdity of his life and opinions—with a sense, too, of shame. Had his adult years fallen increasingly under the determinant of shallowness and folly? His hair, his clothes, his cooking, his vaguely left opinions, his social life, his research plans, the excitement with which, in spite of the discussion with his daughter, he was hurrying to his laboratory this October evening to see what had happened to the rats. Even as he passed through the main gate of the university, showing his ID to the porter, Rosie might be grinning at the abruptness with which his family line had run out. As if here too there were to be no intelligible beginnings. He grinned at the thought of her grinning at him: suddenly it was as if he deserved all the mockery she could manage.

But a few minutes after entering the building in which, on the top floor, he had his laboratory, Jim felt easier. By confining him to a part of himself, the building simplified him. It was always so. The place had a way of sorting him out, he had found. He was here for one reason only: stage by stage to push forward his research, to get results. As though it were a place for professional worries merely, the uneasiness associated with the outside world barely registered. He might be met by it again when he left the building, he knew, but for the time being he could relish this other life in a parallel world.

He took the stairs two at a time, hurrying ahead of himself. It was Sunday night, absolutely still. The only sound was that of his footsteps, echoing in the stairwell. As he ascended, the smells changed, from the dry, chalky smells of the lower floors to the warm, rodent ones of the laboratories. He had heard it said that the atmosphere of the building deteriorated as you climbed, becoming rank, oppressive, but he had never found it to be so. Usually those who described it this way were students uncertain of their subject, who didn't really have a taste for science and hadn't yet realized it.

The rigours of science. Experiments. Experiments on animals. Rabbits, rats. Rats particularly. You spent so much of your time with rats, feeding them, handling them, injecting them, just occasionally playing with them. It could be that you took their smell home with you, that even after you had washed thoroughly it would be about your person, that possibly

it never left you, hot, cheesy, ingratiating, a mark of office until the very end.

He unlocked the door, opening it as quietly as he could. Even so, the rats had heard him. There was a scuttling, then silence, then scuttling again. He could imagine the whiskered alertness, the bright eyes, twitching noses, ears.

He took pleasure in dressing for his work, or garbing himself, as he sometimes thought of it. The white coat, the surgical gloves, occasionally the goggles. There was the quickening of concentration experienced as he mounted the stairs and there was this further quickening as he dressed. It would carry him to the cages and the waiting rats, for sometimes, he thought, they did seem to be waiting for him, their master of ceremonies.

The fact that the experiment whose outcome he was about to investigate had been sudden and impromptu, not part of the broader plan of his research, gave him a sense that it wasn't really his work. Had he not acted on one of those impulses which are at once impersonal and god-given? Chance in the person of himself was responsible. He had taken a side-step, done something behind his own back. But for the rationale behind it, he might have said that he was being irresponsible: even if feverishly conceived, it had been judiciously carried out. Perhaps that was how breakthroughs were made. You broke the mould of dull but worthy research by standing on your head. You pretended you were someone else, someone deviously, relentlessly, perversely brilliant.

So it was that he approached the cages with unusual self-consciousness, awed by the figure before him, hands already raised to open the first cage. A sort of masterful stand-in for himself, smiling in gleeful anticipation. But also sweating. It was what some of his colleagues, winking gravely as though just out of the shadows, called "splitting." "Someone was helping me in there today." "I amazed myself." "Surpassed myself."

He expected to find only healthy rats in the first cage. And so it was. They were resting, nestled into one another, breathing easily, as with the one set of lungs. No: he hadn't expected to find malignancies here and, peer as he might, he didn't find any. After carefully examining each of the rats in turn, he muttered something about "innocence" or "innocents" and with a kind of assured solemnity closed the cage.

Warily he approached the second cage. Here the rats appeared uncomfortable, not settled for the night like the rats in the first cage, but moving about ceaselessly and very slowly, with an air of pain and distress. The abdomen of each was swollen and when he held them upside down the oedema seemed largely to have claimed their legs and tails, which barely moved. Their eyes were back in their heads and, in one case, closed as well

as receded. When he put them back, they stayed where they were, as if they would never move again. On the continuum between innocence and malignancy, where would he place them? How soon would they die and would they all die together or at different times, the young ones first, for example, or last?

Before opening the third cage he pulled on his gloves more tightly and walked up and down. He also put on his goggles and turned up the lights in the cage to maximum, a harsh, white, consuming glare.

He remembered the moment when, with a very strong dose of a potential carcinogen, he had injected these rats. He had done it with intense concentration but with the odd pretence, then, that it had been a kind of afterthought. He hadn't so much closed the lid as let it drop, turning away abruptly, almost violently, and leaving the laboratory. Grave, but gravely excited, marking the occasion with a wild asterisk on his office calendar.

It was worse than he had expected, but also, in its extremity, a kind of triumph, he believed. The rats were so afflicted with tumours that he could hardly tell their fronts from their backs. They were so knobably with growths that they looked like knuckles. In some cases the tumours had invaded the heads, in all cases the eyes were shut, streaming with pus. Two were on their backs, the other four on their sides, all helpless, unmoving. What he was looking at, he realised, was a kind of chaos. Cellular frenzy. The rats had become their tumours. Or the tumours had become the rats. Except in name, they weren't really rats anymore.

He knew what the lumps would feel like were he to touch them; he could gauge the malignancy from where he was. So he didn't touch them, but as if there was something quite badly wrong with them, rubbed his hands angrily together.

One by one he laid the rats on a piece of dark sacking and photographed them from various angles. Then he killed them and, put them in plastic bags in the refrigerator. In the morning he would take them for analysis and, later in the week, he would get the results.

Going down the stairs, he had the feeling that his friend and colleague, John, might be in his room on the first floor. He imagined him at his desk, sweating, breathing hard, staying away from home for as long as he could, Sometimes he slept here, not exactly having intended to, but it happened that way.

For a moment he thought of looking to see if he was in, of inviting him to come up and see the rats. But with a feeling almost of rage he decided against it.

First the driver's side, then the passenger's, then the muddy area behind the wheels, the grimy undercarriage, the procedure carried out with his usual care and efficiency.

It was very dark under the university tower, so not impossible that the animal rights crowd, if they had been active recently, vigilant again, had come and gone undetected.

The explosives they used went off either when you turned on the ignition or a moment or two later. Not that, if you checked your car thoroughly, you had anything to worry about, But he worried about John, dawdling towards his car to drive off, so careless now, so obese.

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There was a note from Rosie on the kitchen table. He picked it up nervously.

Dad,

Sorry your family tree runs out at the end of the seventeenth century. It was a century of revolution, of course, with a king executed, an interregnum, a civil war, monarchists against republicans. Possibly Alfred Lever's father was a soldier, his mother pregnant after a one night stand—or worse. If I had to write a story about it, that's what I'd say, I think. That's how I'd extend your line, attempt to rescue you from the darkness of history. See you at breakfast.

Love, Rosie

He sat with Rosie's note and tried to relax, But he couldn't. He began to feel that he ought to go outside and check his car again, even although he had never done so at this hour before (always only before driving off, home to work, work to home). He tried to tell himself that it wasn't necessary. But didn't succeed. He saw himself outside in the darkness of the street, lying under the car with his torch, checking. But he wouldn't actually go out. He wouldn't leave the chair in which, sweating, trembling a little, he was sitting, Rosie's note crumpled now in his hand. He wouldn't. God help him if he did, if he started to do that sort of thing at all hours, compulsively, like one losing his mind.