

A Lucid Dream

The sky is pink and I hear sirens. I wonder where Alex is, whether he could help. My right hand feels grubby, like I've been dipping it into a bag of copper coins.

I fish in my pocket, find a couple of stray diazepam, a solitary codeine. God knows how long they've been here; it's lucky they didn't fall out when I was doing "The Wheels on the Bus." I slip them onto my tongue, swallow, hard. It's not like it can get any worse. I lie back, let my legs dangle over the edge, stretch my arms out. Try not to think about my dirty hand.

When I first came here, nineteen, university summer break, I thought it was beautiful. Idyllic, even. I used to take clifftop walks on an evening, watch the sun set over Dorset, the Isle of Wight at my back: pink, orange, red, ice lolly colours all melting into each other. I'd go out on my days off, potter around the little town, stop in cafés and book shops and market stalls. I felt like a person. There was a pub I liked on the quaint, crooked high street, and I'd go in there sometimes, eat a home-cooked lasagne on my own, make eyes at the barman. I went home with him once. Didn't go back to the pub, after. But I would drift into the shops, buy postcards to send home, ice creams to eat in the churchyard, surrounded by gravestones half-dissolved by the sting of the sea.

The park sucks you in. You stop leaving the longer you stay, finding fewer and fewer reasons to get out, engage with people who aren't on holiday or paid to cater to the whims of people on holiday. One week, you've got a headache, so you don't go to the café like you'd planned, forgo their poached eggs on sourdough for a bowl of stale Coco Pops. Next, you want to go to town to buy a new book, but the rattly caravan you live in needs a deep clean, so you stay, your fingertips wrinkling against the fluid and foam that cuts away the grime. And then, apart from a trip to the supermarket now and then, when the on-site Nisa doesn't give you what you need, you stop. You don't even walk anymore along the clifftops, as far as you can go, right into the sherbet swirl of the sunset, bats swooping into the blue on your journey home.

Burning Farm, the park is called. The Burning family still runs the place. They live in a large house on the edge of the park, away from the lodges and luxury caravans, away from the village of the damned where the park staff live in tin boxes. Their house is brick-built. Shaded by trees. I went there, once, with Billy.

It was nice to spend a night in an actual bricks-and-mortar house. I usually don't get that comfort until I drive north after the summer has ended. It genuinely improves your wellbeing to not hear birds clattering on your roof when you're trying to get a few more minutes before your alarm pierces your peace.

Billy's parents were out—naturally. His dad owns the camp. Supposedly, Billy's the assistant manager, so we only see him when he feels like shouting at someone, or wants to

buy drugs off Alex. All the girls have slept with him. We watched TV with our feet up on the shiny coffee table, sipping from cans of premium lager, before I went to his room. It was like stepping back in time: posters of topless women, their flesh ripped by staples; dirty pants littering the floor; a PlayStation hooked up to an enormous TV. That instantly recognisable teenage boy smell hit me, as if Billy had never grown up, all sock and fart. Still, it was alright. Something to do.

My hair swims out from my scalp, snaking into the grass. My left leg is hot and floppy; the right one is still rigid. I don't know what time it is. If the police can't find me, they've got no chance of finding Lara. Lana. Whatever her name is. I breathe in, feel my lungs settle onto my back, little pockets expanding. Gulls make their way home noisily; the breeze chills my skin. A lot is happening but all I can think about is my hot left leg, spreading. Defragmenting.

This is my fifth summer at Burning Farm. After tonight, I think it will be my last. My friend from drama school told me I should apply to work here over the long holiday. The pay is shit and you have to spend your days unsticking children's hands from stiff pastel card, and your nights singing songs about mermaids and treasure and anthropomorphic turtles, but it looks great on your CV. Well, that's what he told me. So far, all I've got out of it is one Christmas season in panto (not even the principal boy), repeat employment because I give Billy an annual blow job, and occasional visits to the sexual health clinic. Alex is my friend, and I love him, but he's fucking riddled.

One thing I have learned here, though, is that you can wash away your own pain. Codeine, diazepam, sluiced down with thick syrupy brandy, or just dry-swallowed and squeezed into your stomach. They stop you from feeling very much at all.

"Carrie," I remember Alex saying to me the first time he got me benzos. "You should be careful with this."

I scoffed, slung two back, took another codeine, and didn't move for the next five hours. My limbs softened, melted into the mattress.

But, when I do go, I'll miss the people. I've shared a caravan with Rosa for the last three summers. The kids prefer her. She is pretty, and sweet, and kind, a sort of Snow White look to her face: dark brown hair, fair of face, a hint of peach in the cheeks. My face is too undefined and nothingy, my voice too flat and Yorkshire to be endearing to the under-sevens. Rosa has a soft accent, from somewhere in the home counties—I forget where, all those places sound the same. Her laugh sounds like breeze in a windchime.

Lana likes Rosa. I've seen her, edging closer to Rosa on the dancefloor, her big eyes round with wonder at the sight of a real-life princess.

The kids like me at night, decked out in the Timmy Turtle costume, when I'm throwing sweets to them, or handing out *YOU COMPLETED TIMMY'S DANCE PARTY!!!* certificates, or leading them in a round of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes." It's boiling hot. Sweat tracks down my back, seeps into the green nylon outfit, which I'm certain rarely gets washed. But it's nothing that a cool shower doesn't fix, and that's all my caravan is capable of.

When we're making shark masks and seaweed crowns in the daytime activities, the normal kids flock around Rosa. I end up with the weird ones, the kids with lazy eyes, limps, ear defenders. I like them better—they just want to sit and glue shit together in peace.

Sometimes they leave their things behind. A bubble wand. A Pokemon card. A bitten, raggy animal, crusted in spit. Sometimes I take their things back to the caravan.

This evening's show was led by Alex, with me and Rosa in Timmy and Tilly. I was doing my turtle costume thing, choosing children to win spot prizes of fridge magnets and shitty plasticky games, the kind you get in Christmas crackers. I think Alex had taken something—I don't know what, maybe acid—because he kept saying things like "I am a beast of the forest" into the microphone instead of playing Simon Says, but the parents seemed to find it funny, like he's an off-beat comedian, not a part-time drug dealer from Kettering. The kids were milling around the dance floor, moving their arms as if they were swimming along with Timmy and Tilly. And we heard a scream.

I once saw one of the dads glass another dad full in the face, sharp fragments lodged in his cheek, his eyelid ragged. Sometimes, if I take too much diazepam, his face looms at me out of the nothingness, stitched back together as if by one of the weird kids with a blunt needle and yellow thread.

But nobody is obviously bleeding; the kids start running around in a circle—they pick up momentum, sucking more kids in. Cyclonic. Alex gets to the sound desk, cuts the music. I stand, try to work out what has happened. Where has Rosa gone?

"Where is she? Where is Lana?"

The parents begin to huddle around the screaming woman, the mums extending hands to quell her with a wobble of bingo wing, the dads nonplussed, foreheads creased, guts

hanging over their belts. The kids join in the screaming, an atonal chorus that splits my forehead. The room smells of stale beer and disinfectant.

Rosa is not here. I can't see her anywhere. I snatch the mic off the sound desk.

"We need some quiet," I bellow. The kids skid to a halt; the smaller ones fall over. The screamer has hushed.

"Can somebody tell me what is going on, please?"

Billy has appeared at the back of the room, making his way through the long rows of tables. He almost trips over a child who has set up a ramp for his cars made out of beer mats and different-sized glasses.

The stars have bloomed; they taste of gunpowder. But the sky is blue, too early for stars to be scraped out of the blackness. Rosa might be in the caravan. I could check. I can't move. I fumble in my mind, try to pick up my thread—dropped as if I am falling asleep, letting go of the day—

Yes. I remember. Billy clambered up onto the stage, grabbed the mic, shouted, "Can somebody put the fu—can somebody put the lights on, please?" The room was still dark, shot through with spotlight; the flashing lights on the front of the sound desk winked on, off, on, off. I flicked the switch for them, and a dad stood up, restored normal light to the room. Alex was still, stone-bound, mouth half-agape.

"Can someone please tell me what is happening?"

One of the mums puts her arm around the screamer. "It's this lady's daughter. She's gone."

Billy reached for his walkie-talkie: "LOCKDOWN. *I REPEAT*, LOCKDOWN!" The doors were sealed. Children were counted. Cupboards searched, tables upended. Police called. Alex floated around, useless. Rosa was still missing. How can a turtle escape? But I did. I wriggled out of my turtle skin at the path down to the beach. And I slipped through a door without anyone noticing. I've often wondered if I'm invisible.

My fingers are dissolving into the grass. Something—a fish, a bird—swims overhead, flicking its tail. I feel the splash, the water prickling my nose. The joints in my skull are

l o o s e.

Rattling. I stay stillscared of moving my brain sp-i-ll-ing onto this dry bit of sandfallingcliff.

Blinkthinking about—what? Oh. Lana. Blinkhardthink of—start *thinking properly*, Carrie.
Grit teeth. Breeeeeeeathe.

A description was—

circulated:

Lana is four years old, has blonde hair and blue eyes. She was last seen wearing a pink and white dress with white sandals and white ankle socks. She is likely to be carrying a toy dog, dark brown in colour and well-loved.

If I stay here l o n g enough if I:

sit still

let the diazepam do its thing

will I

d

i

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v

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completely?

Will the bonds holding my particlestogether dis-en-gage let my flesh and hair and fluid leak
onto this crumbling clifftop and

will I

be one with

the earth?

will I

stain the earth

slip into the

sea

while

no-one

notices?

Call Alex nophone without move my eyelids but can't get through where is Lanalala where is Rosa Alex I wish I wish I wish

Has Lana s w u m to the Isle of Wight chalky cliffs so close you could step to them a bounce and a jump—

cool September breeze Alex took me there, old-fashioned hotel boiled eggs in metal cups at breakfast didn't leave the room much. Spent most of the time hazed out fucking when we could muster the effort went to the beach one night, at two, laid in the sand and drew around each other with our fingers let baby waves lap our feet

fell asleep in a tangle woken by dog walkers at dawn. Ate crisps on the ferry home laughed into the whipping air lickingsaltfingers.

My head loses its bones and I get it I am in love with him of all the people—

He appears I know, I know I can summon him it must be love to think of someone—to have them appear show up spring into being just because that's what you want and it must be that I want him—want this—more than anything else.

You meet a greenblue someone when you are nineteentwenty and think yes, this is a person I can laugh with can buy drugs from can work with and not want to pitch myself headlong into the

sea

and yeah you sleep with him sometimes quite a lot—one year every night of the season then the next only once as if for nostalgia's sake but you both

sleep with a lot of people. It doesn't mean you actually feel anything about them does it? He takes you places Weymouth Poole Southampton places washed in the sea and he buys you iced tea and cinnamon buns does this mean that for five years he's loved you sharper than a knife faster than the sun hotter than your fever neck? Does he see you?

"Carrie."

Your name in his mouth is sweeter than the salt cut of breeze than scooping your fingers into the sunset and licking each one clean than the feeling of a small child gazing up at you pink cheeks round and apple eyes wide scared and you know you are the one who is visible now

seen.

I try to tell him Alex my fleshy soft head sending him the words—I can't move.

"Come on, get up. The police need to speak to you."

Help me up help me up I ask but my lips don't move my dry tongue sticky in my mouth doesn't speak I think it hard hard. He must hear—grips my floppy hands. Warm soft hands; mine start to merge into his our tendons growing shoots gripping together.

He pulls

me

up.

"Carrie. What the fuck?"

Looking at my feet, the lump—small brown dog. Crusted, spitty chewed

hers.