

Ursa Major

The stroke unit says Doug has recovered as much as he is going to within a hospital setting. Doug's daughter-in-law says it is time to move in and take charge. Doug is unable to say much at all, but if the daggers he looks find their mark, the Crown Prosecution Service may yet get involved.

It is not just his right arm and leg that have escaped Doug's conscious jurisdiction. His saliva has a life of its own, his laugh has become a lumpy creature that awakes in his chest without warning, and co-ordinating the necessary muscles for speech proves almost impossible when he is tired. After eight weeks in routine-bound hospital, life in the house that used to be his, with an impatient daughter-in-law and an embarrassed son as carers, is disorientating and humiliating. He calls for Gina, forgetting that she died five years ago. He calls for his golden retrievers. Paul tells him they have been rehomed. As he drifts in and out, someone is demolishing his house beneath him. The noise is ceaseless. Some alterations, for greater convenience, he is told.

"Shouldn't it be a nurse?" Paul leafs through the CVs uneasily. It is February, just a week since Doug was discharged from hospital.

“He needs care, not nursing. You and I are rushed off our feet. We need someone who can cook, clean and keep an eye on your father, without costing a fortune. Running this place won’t be cheap.”

“Dad has heaps of money.”

“It would be wrong to waste it.”

Fiona and Paul glance at each other only briefly.

“Are they all foreign?” he asks.

“The agency assures me of very high standards.”

“This one claims to have a PhD in something.”

“There you are then. All your father needs is to be kept calm and clean, poor man.”

“The renovations aren’t exactly calming.”

“Darling, the house was in a state. We had to take care of it.”

Walls are being removed, décor replaced, floorings and furniture updated. Paul smothers qualms. What need now has his father for so many useless possessions? Fiona is right, as always.

“So, Polish cleaners do caring as well?”

“They will do whatever we tell them. This one looks alright. Natalya something-unpronounceable. She’s been in Britain a few months. She speaks five languages.”

“Is English one of them?”

Fiona has promised to ensure Doug’s comfort for his remaining days. She doesn’t know him as well as Paul does. Doug never takes any notice of expiry dates.

She won't give him time to get his words out. Frustration makes his lips, teeth and tongue more knotted and cumbersome than ever. Gina never liked her. Doug hunts down elusive words. Patronising. Triumphant. She is a mink. Doug smells the animal in her, hears the screech and snarl behind her words, sees her hackles rise, her hunter's nose quiver, and her vicious claws extend towards him.

"I know, I know," she keeps saying, her paw raised towards him, "but this is entirely for your own good, Douglas."

No alcohol, no smoking, dogs banished permanently, all his kind of food banned and now he is evicted from his own bedroom to the old nursery next to the bathroom, right over the ceaseless din and seismic activities of the Contractors.

The Polish cleaner regards Doug across the old nursery. *Natalya*. She lifts her tongue high in her mouth, turning over each vowel and thickening each consonant, giving her speech the quality of stiff whipped cream. Her voice is baritone, her eye is cold, her glance calculating. She bristles as she crosses to Doug's medication table. He hears the rumble of her growling breath with every step. Her snout sways and her matted coat ripples. Her claws score the floor and her shoulder hump rises.

"Two rrrredd, one blllue. Take!"

She becomes a woman again, holding a glass of water and a dish of tablets towards his useless right hand. His left hand shakes as he reaches forward and he feels the woman's disdain scorch his face. Ursa Major's growl thunders distantly, but a human hand grasps his wrist in dispassionate assistance.

Doug weeps with rage. Gina was only an amateur, but her pictures were good. Gone. All gone. Paul blusters and avoids eye contact. Doug cannot even get *your mother* out; *mmurr* is as far as he can get. It makes him sound finished.

Dealing with Paul is an exercise in stacking oil. Under pressure he simply oozes away. Flickers of guilt glide from him as quickly as they surface. Doug sees more of his retreating back than of his face. He recalls the affectionate, biddable little boy; this slippery nonentity is someone else.

Natalya grunts as she yanks Doug's left sock over his heel. Dressing has never been this violent before. *Charm her, laddie*. Doug focuses all his energy on his lips and tongue.

“Wwwhere dooo co-me fron i- Po-land?”

War breaks out across her face. The ground shudders under the canons' roar. The whistle of shells fills the nursery. Doug's slipper hits the radiator with a resonant clang.

“NOT-a-Pollleesh! Rrrrrussian!”

The massed military bands of the erstwhile USSR strike up as a hundred tanks in perfect formation smash through the nursery wall, all guns pointed at Doug, who presses himself back in his chair, jaw slack.

“Serpukhov.”

Memories stir of a slow train from Moscow in 1963.

“Sou- o- Moscooooo.”

“Souss of Moskvvva. So! Yyou know my countrrrry. Now I know yyourss. Otheer fffoot!”

“Oh, yes. Coming along nicely.”

Fiona’s voice echoes around the enlarged spaces and unrelieved hardness of her new home. Evidence of ongoing renovation lies all around her like shrapnel on a battlefield. Natalya removes Doug’s underwear from the tumble-dryer in the utility room and listens, eyes glinting.

“As soon as we’re shipshape we’ll have you both over, darling. It’s been too long.”

She catches glimpses of Fiona strutting around the new kitchen, phone pressed to frequently cut hair, the latest in designer wear sheathing her diminutive body. She has a glass of red wine in her free hand. She checks her make-up in the glass of a cupboard door.

“Oh, you poor thing. Yes, I know just how it is. Paul’s father is completely gaga these days. We do what we can with him, but it’s terribly difficult. We have a Polish woman in to help. She’s a decent enough cook, but she has a nasty temper and I don’t think she’s all that honest. Just one more thing to contend with.”

Natalya growls deeply, hatred smouldering in razor eyes, lip curled, teeth bared.

Natalya has the strength of an Olympic gymnast. By late May, Doug’s wheelchair tours his two acres and the surrounding lanes daily, come rain or shine. The herb garden has so far escaped the landscape gardeners; the Mink pretends to be a herb expert. Almost every day Natalya plucks, sniffs and passes leaves and stems, sometimes whole plants to Doug. He knows them all still, but cannot find the names for any of them. Natalya just shrugs. All she wants to know is *good to eat*, *good for tea-infusion*, or *not for consumption*. Doug mimes accordingly. She is a fast learner; she buys a book.

Boxes of framed photos and treasured bric-a-brac litter the nursery floor. Doug is silent, rage blotting out his remaining faculties of speech.

“So!” Ursa Major is in bored, snappish mood. “We chjuck outt, orrr we box upp.”

She holds up a dog show trophy, a photo of six golfing buddies, the decorated blade of an oar from Cambridge rowing days.

“Keeb!” Doug responds defiantly to each, over the jaw-rattling percussion of a masonry drill below.

Suddenly Natalya stops, a photo grasped, avarice emanating in waves across the room. Her gaze rises. Ursa Major has found a bees’ nest full of honey.

“You heff Lemborrrgheeni.”

Those were the days. Doug shakes his head. “Go-ne.”

Her shoulders slump with disappointment.

The summerhouse is full of pungent rot. Doug inhales its familiar musk and closes his eyes. Lush hydrangeas grow by the side wall, clematis wrestles exuberantly with a sweet climbing rose over the roof and the clean, green smell of pelargonium drifts on the warm June breeze. Doug refuses to see the dead stems, blackened leaves and weed-choked borders that are the reality in this forgotten corner. He welcomes Natalya’s evident disdain. It guarantees blissful solitude.

He wakes suddenly, his neck cricked. A dog barks once. Doug wrestles with shoulder muscles and eye lids. A Westie sits on the path, head on one side, and barks again. Doug pats his knee and the dog springs lightly, pressing its wet nose to Doug’s,

breathing glorious doggy-breath in his face. His lumpy laugh escapes him and he tugs the dog's ear playfully. The dog jumps down and presses an old ball against Doug's knee. He throws the ball randomly and there is a scuttering of claws on gravel. The ball is back. They play until Doug is exhausted and then they sleep companionably in the sun. Doug dreams of Gina.

The movement of his wheelchair wakes Doug. A Soviet military glare freezes the sunshine.

“What theesss?”

A packet of Silk Cut and a lighter. She has pulled them from beneath his knee rug. He shrugs lopsidedly. It is a mystery to him. She sighs and a rumble of distant tanks shakes his chair. She opens the packet, lights a cigarette and blasts a plume of smoke across his face. He breathes it in greedily. Forbidden fruit.

“Ffffoollish ol- mman,” she says without rancour.

She presses the cigarette between his lips, his first taste of lipstick in nearly six years.

Natalya has found the phone number for the Occupational Therapist, who visits and mentions again the importance of a stairlift.

“I am not having one of those things cluttering up my staircase,” Fiona hisses at Paul in the aftermath of the visit.

Paul scratches his head and gauges his options carefully.

“It will make it much easier getting him downstairs.”

“He doesn't need to be downstairs.”

Conversation over, but Natalya has scented a battle she can win.

Some days, Gina spends hours with Doug. Her effortless optimism steadies him.

Through closed eyes he senses her presence, hears the soft soprano of her cheerful humming, smells the perfume of her favourite soap, sees again her mischievous smile.

The stairlift gives Doug motion sickness. Natalya sends him up and down mercilessly until his inner ear adjusts. She has parked him in the echoing new kitchen now, lost in the remodelled layout of his home. Impervious surfaces glint coldly. Gina's cosy baking smells are ancient history.

Doug listens for the clatter of Mink heels or the sticky glide of oil, but there is silence until a despairing groan and the flush of a toilet. An upstairs toilet flushes almost simultaneously. Natalya lopes through the house with Doug's coat. Her ursine growl hints at satisfaction. Doug hauls his mouth into action.

“Wh-where aaah the-ey?”

“Crrrap-house.”

Another flush.

“S-sick?”

“Oh, yyess.” She nods. “Perrrhapsss pelargonnium crrispum in selludd not aggrrrees weess them.”

Doug gasps. Stalin stands glaring down at him, implacable.

“You po-po-poisom me, too?” Doug demands.

“Nnot eeff you giff me no rreason.”

Doug is woken by unaccustomed silence. His body clock fails him. In his chair.

Dressed. Daytime. His eyes focus slowly. Bolshevik disdain rolls over him.

“So!”

Doug swallows with great effort and moves the tongue that has become a beached whale in his mouth.

“Mwfff?”

He sees a glint.

“Wwwhearre you gettt Corvvvoisier, hnnn?”

“Wha-?”

The click and scrape of a screw-top opening.

“Theess could killl yyou.” The top drawer of his bedside cabinet is open. “You vunt die eeven soonner?”

Doug has no idea where the bottle has come from, but pictures Paul’s flickers of compunction. Natalya shrugs impatiently. She snatches up his empty teacup, half fills it with brandy and presses it into his left hand. Its warmth seeps through Doug’s limbs and thoughts as he drinks, like sudden sunshine at the start of spring.

“How many guests?”

“Around eighty. It’s so important not to overlook anyone.”

“Do we know that many people locally?”

“I do.”

“And we can fit them all in? If it rains?”

“Trust me.”

Paul takes several gulps of wine. Fiona’s parties are always strategic, but this is on a new scale. It is her grab for the local notables and the local press in one go. Flatter,

impress, conquer. The word *overweening* drifts treacherously through the hinterlands of his mind.

“The catering?”

“I’ll get some help in for Natalya.”

The renovations are finished, the garden reshaped and planted. They are open for business. Paul finds a pit of dread weighing down his stomach.

Doug’s body is not his own some days.

“Take! Take!” Two yellow tablets are thrust at him.

What’s the hurry? his body asks. As though reading the sluggish vibrations,

“Yyou be lllate for lllittle doggg.”

Doug gapes at the watchful Grizzly.

“You... kn-now.”

His arms are suddenly pinned to his chair and garlic-breath floods his face.

Natalya directs a fierce glance through his face and into the depths of him. No-one has looked past his failing body since before the stroke. His pulse quickens.

“Whkhoo borrow doggg forrr yyou? Whkhoo buy brrranddy ent cigggarettes? Hnnn?”

“Pau-l?”

“Pah!” A crashing wave of garlic fumes.

Doug’s thoughts whirl. He sees a mouth corner twitch, an eyebrow quiver with humour. The honey sweetness of human kindness from this bolshiest of bees’ nests tickles his soul. His lumpy laugh shakes him.

“YOU!”

The woman lowers her guard momentarily in a wry smile. “Nat-al-ya!” She straightens up and picks up the yellow tablets again.

“MARRY ME!” Doug shouts.

Day turns to night. Stalin materialises. The crushing contempt of a hundred tanks roars into view. Sirens sound, howitzers pound, adrenaline pumps World’s End through Doug’s veins and then, through shattered thoughts, he recognises the sound of a deep, terrifying Slavic laugh. He gasps the ragged breath of the survivor-against-all-odds, and swears never again to risk such provocation of Uncle Joe’s wrath.

The herb garden is burgeoning in the heat of late July and Natalya knows her way around it now. She digs up a plant and shows it to Doug.

“Bet...bet...”

“Bbetonny.” She sniffs it and nods. “Ggoodd.”

“No-t roo-ts.” Doug takes time to make himself clear.

“Oh, yyess. Rrroots nnice in selludd for Bigg Parrrti.”

Doug pictures the huge salads she makes.

“No!”

“Time for ciggarrettes!” The betony disappears inside her collecting bag and she pushes Doug down to the summerhouse.

“For God’s sake, where is Natalya?”

Fiona is flushed and sexy. Paul, who has already drunk off a bottle of Shiraz, smiles lecherously and reaches for her.

“She had to take Dad to an appointment earlier.”

“WHAT?”

Guests mill inquisitively through house and garden, astonished by the alteration, many of them nostalgic for the unpretentious old days.

“She’s supposed to be here,” Fiona hisses savagely.

“I’ll do some mingling, make sure everyone’s happy.”

Fiona glares at her husband’s retreating back.

Natalya hauls Doug from the car and settles him in the wheelchair.

“Ggoodd?”

“Goo-.” He nods.

She straightens his tie, smooths his shoulders. The suit is huge on him, but the cut is excellent. They exchange a look of conspiracy.

“Yyou mmake – yyou knnow – ggoodd entrunce, hnnn?”

“Cin-drella.”

“Yyourrr hhouse.”

People are congregating on the terrace and Natalya heads for the thick of things. Fiona corrals a few stragglers, smiles archly at a woman with a camera, buzzes with importance and fails to see the wheelchair until the local Mayor shouts,

“Doug! Good to see you again!”

All attention swivels. Fiona’s limelight is filched.

“How are you keeping, Doug?” The Mayor reaches out for a handshake with a man he has respected for decades and awkwardly grasps Doug’s proffered left hand. Doug’s lopsided smile creaks into action. He is mobbed by well-wishers, Gina’s friends, a couple from the golf club, a Rotarian, the local vet.

“Like to prose toas-!” His voice booms out on a wave of euphoria. A hush falls.

“Where-s champay?”

People look around and Fiona emerges, retrieving attention, taking charge, soothing, distracting, re-choreographing.

“Will someone pour the bloody champagne!” It is the longest, clearest sentence Doug has managed since the stroke.

A scramble ensues. Bubbly is distributed. Fiona snatches the glass from Doug’s left hand and Natalya replaces it with another. Doug waves the glass for silence, old authority restored in these moments of disconcertion.

“Po-po-pose toas- to by love-y wife. Natal-ya.”

Silence: stunned, total, bottomless.

Then the brilliant flash of a camera and another. Then a chaos of voices: *What did he say? Did he mean it? Natalya! Congratulations! Good God!*

“Don- ea-t sala-d,” Doug says earnestly to the Mayor. “Te-ll other.”

“Absolutely NO WAY!” Fiona’s explosive apoplexy swings all heads her way again. “This is a complete farce. My poor father-in-law is in no fit state to enter into any legal arrangements –.”

“Ddocctorr wuss whunne off ourrr witnessess.” Natalya’s growl is deeper and more dangerous than ever.

The journalist from the local weekly grabs some shots and then holds out her phone to capture the conversation. Fiona forces a smile, changes gear.

“My father-in-law’s practical jokes are notorious!”

Murmurs of *are they?* ripple across the terrace.

“Iss nno ddyoke. Hhyere iss certifficattte of mmmerrrrriage.”

Natalya waves the document, Stalin victorious.

“You scheming...immigrant!” the Mink snarls and spits, edging for position.

The journalist follows gleefully with her phone.

Doug drains his glass to the dregs, his left foot tapping uncontrollably with mirth. The Grizzly rumbles, rising on back paws.

“Thearre are two Meessses MmacIntyre now. My hhuussband iss ownerr hhyerre.”

Doug quells his lumpy laugh and settles back to watch the showdown, towering Ursa Major and squealing little Mink. His face aches with unaccustomed smiling. The door of life has inched open again. Doug MacIntyre has stepped back on stage. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees his son's back as he glides around the side of Gina's conservatory.