

GETTING ON

And so the stage transforms, to the sound of the fox cries, or maybe to Duran Duran's "Hungry Like The Wolf." A small flat. The middle of the night. In the bed, JUNE is dying, slowly. Not too long to wait now. Her daughter, MELINDA, sits nearby. Without a sound, JUNE wakes up and turns her head towards MELINDA, who notices immediately and comes over.

MELINDA: Alright, Mum? D'you want a sip of water? Or a cup of tea?

JUNE: Some water.

MELINDA helps JUNE to prop herself up a bit higher, then helps her to drink some water from a cup with a straw. She then eases JUNE back down into bed.

MELINDA: Are you a bit hot?

JUNE nods. MELINDA pulls the blanket back. With a cool flannel, MELINDA gently wipes JUNE's face, neck, lower arms and hands.

MELINDA: D'you want to read a bit more of *The Shining*? We're nearly at the end.

JUNE: No.

MELINDA: Is it hurting?

JUNE nods. MELINDA reaches for an ampoule of morphine and a syringe.

JUNE: But not enough. I'll have some later. With a cup of tea.

MELINDA: Alright, then. You go back to sleep for a bit, eh?

JUNE quickly dozes off. MELINDA sits in the chair and picks up some knitting, but doesn't knit. She just sits and watches JUNE. Outside, the foxes cry.

Time passes and the flat readjusts. JUNE and MELINDA are joined by ROXANA, a palliative care nurse. She is heavily pregnant.

ROXANA: And what did they say to do, eh, when the pain got really bad? What did you promise to do, June?

JUNE: Take some morphine. Call the doctor.

ROXANA: Yeah, so why didn't you do it then, June, eh?

MELINDA: I can't get her to let me give it to her. When it's just me and her, I can't make her have it, even when it's bad.

ROXANA: So you got to promise, in future, if it gets really bad again, you'll take the morphine. Promise me, and promise Mel.

JUNE: Alright. I promise. I will let you give me some.

ROXANA: That's what I like to hear.

ROXANA starts to pack her things. MELINDA hovers near her.

MELINDA: Thankyou. She doesn't listen to me. But if she's promised you, I trust her to do it.

ROXANA: It's alright. This happens all the time. They don't want to take the morphine because if they do, it's like admitting that there's no chance left, and that they're ready to go. She's still not 100% ready. But it'll be alright. You'll see.

JUNE: You got time for a cup of tea before you go?

ROXANA: I've maybe got time for a glass of squash before I go. He doesn't let me drink caffeine no more.

ROXANA rubs her bump.

MELINDA: Orange, blackcurrant or summer fruits?

ROXANA: Summer fruits, please.

JUNE: I lived on tea when I was having her. Tea and fags, right up to when she popped out. Never done her any harm. Bugged me up, though, now, hasn't it?

ROXANA: Oh, I wouldn't let the doctor hear me say it, but you know what, fuck it, if you want to have a smoke, have one. It's not gonna make no difference now, is it? Enjoy life, however long you got. Squeeze all the juice out of it like somebody squeezed these summer fruits for me.

ROXANA sits down with a big sigh of relief.

ROXANA: I tell you what, girls — I am looking forward to my maternity leave and to spend some time just sitting on my arse!

MELINDA: When do you finish?

ROXANA: End of next week.

MELINDA: Eh? But what's gonna happen to us when you've gone?

ROXANA: Didn't nobody call you about this? Or send you a letter? I thought you knew and didn't want to talk about it, so I didn't say nothing — I'm sorry. My replacement's gonna start coming in next week for me to hand over, and he—

MELINDA: He? They're sending a man? No... I don't want that...

ROXANA: He'll do the nights next week while I still do the days, and then after that, he'll come to do the days and the nights.

JUNE: Don't suppose I'll see you again, then, after that. I was hoping I'd still be around to see your baby when he's born.

ROXANA: Ah, June, that's nice. I'll send you some photos on Whatsapp. And we'll see how you're doing, then, eh?

MELINDA: I just don't like the thought of a stranger, coming in here now, now Mum's got so used to seeing you and I've got so...reliant. She's vulnerable. And now we're so close to—

ROXANA: It'll be alright, Mel. Trust me. Change isn't always bad.

Time passes and the flat readjusts. Night-time. Next week. MELINDA walks around, agitated.

JUNE: Oh, Melinda, what you pacing up and down for?

MELINDA: He's late. Roxana was never late. She was always here, bang on—

The doorbell rings. MELINDA freezes and looks at the door.

JUNE: There you are. Bang on. Well, let him in then!

MELINDA peeks through the spyhole, then unchains and unlocks the door. She opens it. On the other side is LOUIE, a big, strapping lad with a Geordie accent.

LOUIE: Hello — Melinda, is it? I'm Louie — I'm here to help you and your Mam for when Roxana goes on her maternity leave. She said she'd told you I'd be round. Would it be alright if I come in? Or do you want to see my ID badge?

LOUIE holds up his ID badge and flashes a beaming smile.

JUNE: For God's sake, just open the door!

MELINDA opens the door and steps back. LOUIE comes in, takes in everything about the flat in two seconds and turns his complete attention to JUNE.

LOUIE: Hello — you must be June, I'm Louie — shall we just go straight to first names now we're friends? Roxana's told me all about you.

JUNE: What's she told you, Louie?

LOUIE: She said how you like a cheeky fag, and that you like reading Stephen King books.

MELINDA: I read them to her. It's one of the things I do. We're nearly at the end of *The Shining*.

JUNE holds up a bent finger and points it at LOUIE.

JUNE (putting on a croaky voice): Redrum! Redrum!

MELINDA: Mum!

LOUIE copies JUNE with his finger and his voice.

LOUIE (croaky voice): Redrum! Redrum!

They both break off, laughing.

MELINDA: Careful, Mum.

LOUIE: I'd like to listen to a bit of it with you sometime if you're ever reading it when I'm here.

JUNE: I think I'd like a bit of it now. Just need to prop up—

MELINDA instinctively goes to help her but LOUIE is already there. Very gently, he settles JUNE in a comfortable upright position.

JUNE: I would also very much like a fag.

MELINDA: Oh, Mum! Stop showing off now!

JUNE: I am not! It can't make things any worse than they are. And I might as well enjoy myself, like Roxana said. It can't hurt, can it, Louie?

LOUIE: Well, it won't do your breathing no good. But as long as you're alright with that, and Melinda's alright with that, I don't see what harm it's gonna do.

Reluctantly, MELINDA puts a cigarette between JUNE's lips and lights it. JUNE reaches to move it, and LOUIE is immediately there to support her arm.

JUNE: Thankyou, doctor!

Time passes and the flat readjusts. Daytime. ROXANA is here.

MELINDA: I can't believe it's your last day already. What are we gonna do without you?

JUNE: How long have you got before the baby's due?

ROXANA: Well, it's supposed to be the 16th, but my first one was a day early, and my second one was a week early, so I'm expecting this one to come out even quicker!

JUNE: Well, hopefully, I will still be alive to see him after all.

ROXANA: Yes, Missus, I can see you got some spring in your step! I was gonna ask how you're getting on with Louie, but maybe I don't need to ask. Is that a bit of lippy you got on there, June?

JUNE: I got Melinda to put the brush through my hair. Help me put a bit of face on. Got to make some effort, haven't you?

ROXANA: What do you think, Mel? Do you like him?

MELINDA: He's alright. I barely know a thing about him.

JUNE: I like him. It's positively indecent. Woman my age. Boy his age. Me, one foot in the grave. It's morbid. I love it.

ROXANA: He hasn't been working with us very long. He lives on his own, doesn't have no family, not here anyway, no wife, no ex-wife, no kids. He's straight. And he's single. But that's about all I know. He's a bit of a lone wolf. Man of mystery.

JUNE: That's good to hear, isn't it, Mel?

MELINDA ignores that and produces a gift bag for ROXANA.

MELINDA: We've got some presents for you — one for you and one for the baby. But don't open them now because I'll cry.

ROXANA: Ah, that's so sweet of you, thankyou! I know I shall cry, too, so I will open them when I get home! And it is time I was going, so give me a kiss goodbye, both of you!

ROXANA kisses JUNE. JUNE holds her tightly.

JUNE: You take care of yourself, darling, d'you hear me? I'm not quite ready for keeling over just yet, so you bring this little one round, and the other two, when you're feeling up to it, won't you?

ROXANA: Oh, the two I've got would run you ragged already, I don't know how I'm gonna be when there's three of them!

MELINDA is on the verge of tears. ROXANA kisses her.

ROXANA: Oh, now... It'll all be alright, you know.

MELINDA: I'm just gonna miss you so much. I love you.

JUNE: Me, too.

ROXANA starts to head out of the door.

ROXANA: Ah, I love the two of you as well! And listen, I know I'm not at work from today, right, but that doesn't matter, you keep in touch with me, yeah, no matter what's happening. And I'll send you the Whatsapp pictures when he's born, and then I'll come and see you, sometime, whenever, right? Alright. I'll see you! Love you! See you!

And with that, ROXANA is gone. MELINDA closes the door and leans against it.

JUNE: You heard what she said, sweetheart. It'll all be alright. Change isn't always bad. You just gotta give it a chance—

Nodding, trying her hardest to agree, MELINDA gets upset and hurries out.

Time passes and the flat readjusts. A series of examples of how the long nights are spent. LOUIE and MELINDA folding bedsheets together. LOUIE feeding JUNE with red soup, carefully blowing on each mouthful before he gives it to her. MELINDA making a sandwich and leaving the plate next to LOUIE as he dozes. LOUIE reading a passage from "Cujo" to JUNE. LOUIE comforting JUNE when the pain gets bad. LOUIE administering morphine to JUNE when the pain gets particularly bad.

Eventually, the last night comes. Outside, the foxes cry. JUNE is propped up in bed. MELINDA is asleep at the foot of the bed. LOUIE sits next to JUNE.

JUNE: Thankyou, Louie.

LOUIE: What for?

JUNE: For making these last few weeks...better. For me. And for her.

LOUIE: It's alright. I enjoy coming to see you. Both of you. I'm alright to say that to you, aren't I?

JUNE: You are. And we enjoy having you here. Even if one of us doesn't show it much. And it's because of that, I want you to promise me something now.

LOUIE: What's that?

JUNE: I want you to promise that you and her will start living your lives properly, after I'm gone. When I'm dead. She shouldn't have been cooped up in here this long with me. Trapped in Room 237 with the mouldy old lady in the bath. I think you could do it if you wanted to, but she won't know how. She'll need someone to be there with her. So whether

it's with you, or with somebody else, that'll be your business to sort out between you. But I'm just asking you to help her. Knowing that she has you here at least would make it easier for me to accept what's coming.

LOUIE: I promise. I mean it.

JUNE: Now... Come and give me a kiss goodnight.

LOUIE kneels down by the side of the bed and gives JUNE a kiss. She holds his face in her hands and beams at him.

JUNE: Oh, Louie! What big eyes you've got!

JUNE relaxes back and doesn't take her eyes off him. JUNE dies. Her smile remains.

Time passes and the flat readjusts. LOUIE and MELINDA are sitting together.

MELINDA: It was weird when they came and took the oxygen tank away and the wheelchair and the hoists and stuff. It was easier when they actually took Mum away. It's like all that stuff was more of a part of Mum, more of a reminder of Mum, than she actually was herself.

LOUIE: When are they coming to collect all these medicines?

MELINDA: Don't know. Soon, I hope. I have to say, I'm finding it very tempting, sitting here surrounded by all this. Knowing what it was capable of doing for Mum when her pain was at its worst. And knowing that what I feel now feels worse even than watching Mum when her pain was at its worst.

LOUIE: I could take them away for you, if you like. They hadn't ought to be hanging around here.

MELINDA: You hadn't ought to still be hanging around here, either. The care package was supposed to stop when Mum died. I don't inherit it like the rest of Mum's belongings. You should be with someone else who needs you the way Mum needed you.

LOUIE: I do go where I'm needed. Don't you need me, Mel?

MELINDA: I don't know how to answer that. What I need... What I want...hasn't been a thing I've thought about in ages.

LOUIE: It's harder to be the one who cares for somebody else. It's hard to put someone else completely first. It's actually very easy to let someone look after you. You just have to let them.

MELINDA: Maybe... But what if you can't? What if you physically can't because you don't know how? When Mum got properly ill, I gave up everything completely to look after her. I didn't put my life on hold, thinking I'd go back and pick it up again after. I shut it all down. So I haven't got any other life to go back to. Looking after Mum is all I've been doing for so long. It's all I know how to do. So who am I gonna look after now?

LOUIE: I promised your Mam I'd help you, whatever that meant doing. I want to help. So tell me what to do, and I'll do it. If me going will help, for now, then say, and I'll go.

MELINDA: No. Don't. Have you had any tea?

LOUIE: I had a pasty before I come out.

MELINDA: A pasty is not enough for a working man. So let's see what I've got.

MELINDA looks around in the kitchen.

MELINDA: Not a lot, is what I've got. But what I have got is loads of tins of red soup. I could give you some of that. Or is that a bit too much like dying people's food?

LOUIE: No, it's not. I would love some, if it's not too much trouble.

MELINDA: It is not too much trouble.

MELINDA opens a tin of red soup and starts to heat it up. She crumbles something into it as it cooks. LOUIE wanders around and goes over to the bed where JUNE once lay.

LOUIE: We never did finish "Cujo", did we?

MELINDA: No. I wasn't fussed. So I probably won't bother now.

LOUIE: And we never even got started on *Misery* and *Needful Things* and all these others.

MELINDA: I might read some of them. Eventually. But not just yet.
Your soup's ready. D'you want anything else in it? Bit of salt or pepper or Worcester sauce or something?

LOUIE: Nah, ta. I like red soup to taste like red soup.

MELINDA: Come and sit and eat it, then.

MELINDA places his bowl down at the table. He comes to sit with her. He takes a mouthful and almost spits it back out.

MELINDA: Is something up with it?

LOUIE: Just a bit hot still.

MELINDA takes the spoon from his hand, takes a spoonful of soup from the bowl, blows on it and feeds it to him.

MELINDA: Better?

LOUIE: Better.

MELINDA takes another spoonful of soup, blows on it and feeds him again.

Time passes and the flat readjusts. It is very dark. The sound of rustling beneath bedclothes and a man's voice, groaning. Outside, the foxes cry. The groaning and rustling get louder. Quite suddenly, the bedside lamp clicks on. The light is trained on LOUIE. He wakes up sharply, but he is very groggy. MELINDA is sitting in the chair beside the bed.

MELINDA: You're awake! D'you want a sip of water? Or a cup of tea?

LOUIE: What am I still doing here? What time is it?

MELINDA: After three. Before four. You've been asleep.

LOUIE: Why am I? What's happened? Why'm I in the bed?

MELINDA: Are you a bit hot?

MELINDA pulls back the blanket. Underneath, LOUIE is dressed in one of JUNE's old nightdresses and nightgowns. He has also been securely tied to the bed. MELINDA dabs his face with a flannel.

LOUIE: What's going on, Mel...? Why'm I like this?

MELINDA: I answered my own question, when we were talking before. About who to care for now. Mum's gone. She was ill and she was weak and she died. And I can't do anything about that. But you're strong. And I will keep you here and keep you strong.

LOUIE: Why haven't I gone home...? I need to get home...

MELINDA: No, you asked me if I wanted you to go, and I said no. I want you to stay. I'll take the very best care of you and I will give you the very best of everything. You just have to stay in bed.

LOUIE: No, Mel... I can't... You can't... This isn't right...

MELINDA: It is right. It's absolutely the right thing. You just have to make the adjustment in your own head. You're so used to looking after other people and it's going to take time.

LOUIE: I'm not gonna... This isn't gonna solve anything...

MELINDA: It's harder to be the one who cares for somebody else. It's hard to put someone else completely first. It's actually very easy to let someone look after you. You just have to let them. And you have to let me look after you, now.

LOUIE: No... I won't... Somebody'll come. Somebody'll miss me...

MELINDA: They probably won't. Who's to notice when a lone wolf just... wanders off?

LOUIE: Just... Get all this off of us, will you? Just... Untie me!

MELINDA: You're getting yourself agitated now. I think you need a bit of quiet time. I'll just give you a little something to help you get off to sleep.

MELINDA takes out the ampoule of morphine and the syringe, and loads the syringe with a cautious dose of morphine.

LOUIE: No... I don't want any of that stuff... Please, Mel...

MELINDA gives LOUIE the cautious dose of morphine.

MELINDA: That's it. Don't fight it. Just let yourself drift off. I'll be here when you wake up. I'll do you some red soup, or a bit of toast. Just go to sleep now. And I'll come and give you a kiss goodnight.

MELINDA takes LOUIE's face in her hands and gives him a lingering kiss.

MELINDA: Oh, Louie... What big eyes you've got!

END OF SECTION