

Stock

Cynan Jones

He sat integrated amongst the felled trees, cracked a crust of bark with just the barest pressure of his foot. The rabbits, compact shapes in the field above the cottage, unfolded pointed wings and scaled into the air, as if the bark's crack had sent them up.

It was stony cold. You are sleep deprived, he told himself. Not rabbits. They were never rabbits.

The tin panged as he got up the last forkful of uncooked beans. Chewed. Assessed the tubular timber not yet fetched from the slope. The countless downed trunks.

He'd read the notice, at the edge of the devastated plantation. Some disease he couldn't pronounce. 'A legal notice has been issued to fell these trees because they are infected.' And we already have the dieback, with the ash. They're cutting them too.

What would they do? The kites now were black motifs on the nearly morning sky. If we got some big illness. Some of us. Would they cut *us* down? Cull *us*?

The TB papers. His uncle's shaking hands.

Cuckoo spit. It's cuckoo spit next. He'd seen it on the farming news. The little bugs that make it. Carrying some invasive thing. Some germ deadly to plants.

He looked around for puffs of froth on the thin growth that was coming up between the fallen larches. There's none. Too early. It's too early in the year. And then, finally, there was movement. A bar of light from the cottage.

He put the bean tin down, took the old brass telescope from his pocket. Click click, drew it to its length, raised it, unexpected chill against his eye.

Mrs Lewis Banc stood in the open doorway. With her apron on, bright and patterned, it looked like she peered over a border of small flowers.

Perhaps she sleeps in it. In a chair. Perhaps she sleeps in her clothes, like Nan.

Take them. He sent a message out to her. These are for you.

Mrs Lewis stared at the laden carrier bags before her on the path.

Commissioned by Narrating Rural Change Network, funded by NERC Discipline Hopping Award, in 2022. First Published by Nightjar Press March 2023. Copyright Cynan Jones. Published online March 2024 by Narrating Rural Change Network.
<http://ruralchange.swansea.ac.uk>

For you.

He sent a message out again, and now she stepped forward and bent. She picked up some food packets, held them for a moment as if they were things she didn't understand. Then she put them back, looked around, and carried the bags one by one into the house.

The door closed.

He scanned up and out beyond the cottage, to the more distant bwthyn on the hill, barely at the range of the scope, the carrier bags there just visible through the crossbars of the garden gate.

When he looked back to Mrs Lewis's cottage, he saw her framed in the window, in the lights that were on in the kitchen, seated at the table, seemingly eye to eye with a pineapple, as if the fruit were something votive.

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The sprung bell zonged mutedly as he came into the shop, the brush of the draught baffle across the wiry mat, the snip as the latch closed to.

He carried a vaporous energy from being awake all night.

The thin plastic dust sheets that had billowed gently when the door opened settled again against the shelves.

He looked at the carrier bags still left. The goods he had apportioned up. Caught sight of himself in the glass of the set-aside Post Office counter in the corner of the room. He didn't look the way he thought he looked.

She probably never had a pineapple that wasn't out of a tin.

He looked guilty and tired. Not as if he had done something good.

The glass-topped chest freezer gave an agitated hum. A sort of acknowledgement.

Mrs Lewis Banc.

Elin and Arwyn Cam Uchaf.

Edie Pen Cwm.

Maggie Tyddyn Llwyd.

Idris Bwlch.

They were always good to the shop. He mentally ticked them off.

The prip prip prip of postage stamps parting from their perforations. The thudunk of inking pension books.

Who else? Who else is left? Saw a map in his head.

The damping sponge, desiccated now, like a slice of stale toast.

He reached a milk from the open chiller. Jiggled it from between the cartons of fruit juice he hadn't yet shared out. Swigged. Felt a low burn in his finger creases against the cool plastic handle.

Flip-flop sound of making butter in a jar.

It's weak, this. Even the Full Fat. It's not like we had it. *The bottles chatter in the crates, the chickeny chatter of a chicken coop as Tadcu drove the van.* He still remembered the round. Which house came after which. The pull of lugging the bags in his upper arms.

He took one of the remaining old chocolate bars from beside the till, felt the till judge this act, blink, as the movement of his hand reflected in the black of its switched-off display. Tore the wrapper with his teeth. *Taste, the glue of stamps.* The chocolate pocked with tiny nets of air, paled marks. Wildly out of date.

Took stock.

There were the few over-the-counter medicines, sanitary items that embarrassed him.

The women's refuge would take them. He felt a twisting emotional pain - but I don't know exactly where it was, where she went – through his middle, and out. And then it was as if that pain trapped momentarily in the shop as the windows hummed, a recycling van pulled up outside, idled, and there was the clatter of glass. The van just a coloured patch through the drawn net curtains.

Let it go. Let it go. Eat, now. Get some sleep. Then, it's Wednesday, go and see Nan.

Mandy. She was always good. Would come with a list for Pencarreg too.

Pencarreg's gone though. Second home. Posh gravel. Solar panels.

The nearest would be Irfon, Maen Isaf. But he has the carers, now.

He assessed what was left again, the ready-loaded bags of refrigerated goods set there in the chiller.

Everybody has to have something.

Get some sleep. You'll be out again tonight.

The recycling van gurned, rattled, pulled away. The windows shook again.

I could just leave him dog food. The carers wouldn't notice that. Smoothed his hand habitually across the melamine as he passed behind the shop counter, went through into the rest of the house.

—

Every time he opened the driver's door he thought the same thing. I need to WD40 it.

He thought this time, just do it now, go in and get it and do it now, but then he thought of the hour-long drive ahead. Hour there, hour back.

He pulled the door closed, winced, even though he knew it was coming, at the arthritic creak, but more in concern it would draw attention. *The graunch of the old cowshed doors.*

He thumbed the key and the engine woke with the sort of enthusiasm of an old dog offered a walk.

It's a good engine, just the body work. They said it every time. Body'll go before the engine. Made the same joke every time the MOT came round, 'got through on omissions'. He didn't really understand it.

The hour drive there and the hour drive back, and that he had to drive through town, made him nervous. It was the only time, he figured, the car might get flagged by the police. But he couldn't have Nan in a nearer home, there'd be too much coming and going, people who knew her.

—

- Nan.

He put the carrier bags down in the kitchenette doorway.

- Wednesday.

She looked at him, pleased, from the chair.

- Half closing.
- Yes, Nan.

- A week, then, already.

Conversational, not a complaint. She had the chair faced into the flat, not at the window, not the placid grey screen of the television. At the photograph of his uncle and Tadcu and the cows coming in to the parlour to milk.

- I could move your chair. If you want. To look out.
- No. I'm happy here.

He thought he could see for a moment the scene of the photograph reflect in her glasses but it was just the blacks and whites of the room.

- Shop busy?
- Always, Nan.
- Good to have the half day then.
- Yes. You can go in the day room, you know.
- I'm happy, *Bach*.
- I've brought some things. Do you want soup?
- Are you?
- I'll have something with you.

Slightly sick. Not enough food, not enough sleep. The low anxiety, the drive.

- I'll do soup. You can keep the meals on wheels for tea.

The tiny space trembled as a bus pulled into the stop outside, its throb swallowed in the double-glazing, different from the recycling van that morning.

- They don't stop, those. I don't know where people are going all the time.

He showed her the soup tins.

- Which do you want?
- They're different, these.
- They're the ones the suppliers had this week, Nan. They're the same. Just different packets.

Her hands hovered.

- This is oxtail.
- Yes.
- If you'll have some as well then.

—

The meaty cow smell brought a queasy churn through his stomach. He was having trouble with the smell. Already the soup was agitating in the thin pan. Began to faintly hiss.

- No Mari again today, then.
- School, Nan. I told you. She's started half days. In the holidays maybe.

He pushed the kitchenette door part-closed to get at the unit behind, fetch out bowls and small plates. Stood up too fast.

- Mrs Evans Ty'n Banc still coming in?
- Every Thursday, yes. She always asks after you.

I'm not going to be able to eat this. Grey little lumps were surfacing and turning over on themselves in the pan.

- Six she's got.

He clattered the bowls. Fumped the fridge loudly open. Put the butter on the worktop.

There was an open packet of processed ham, thin discoloured slices. A small jug of milk. He lifted the ham as a pad.

- Six!

You have to eat. Still the sick feeling. You can't be up so long, carry stuff, on nothing.

He rolled the pad and ate it, shut the fridge with a receipting suck. A fleeting remembrance of that morning in his muscles.

- Car going well still?
- Going lovely, Nan.

He thought of the perishables lined up in the shop. Lifted the soup from the electric hob. Poured it into the bowls. Found sliced bread.

He heard the soft roll of Nan's chair table as she got it in place, wheels over the inexplicable wiry carpet tiles.

- I'll do toast.

The photograph of the cows was stuck in his mind. The high hips of the Holsteins. The cowshed.

The window rumbled again as he reached spoons from the drainer, spacked the drawer open and transferred things into the cutlery tray, scraped dried missed scabs of food off with his nail.

It was the first sign. Things not washed properly. Lids not properly on the jam she made, tiny blooms of mould. These things at first he put down to her eyes.

He had a fleet, horrible thought of her being cleaned, the ladies that came. *Phop*, toast. Scraped on butter. A muted hiss as the bus moved away.

Tadcu, in the photo. Tadcu, he wouldn't have coped.

When he'd taken the food through and knew Nan would not leave the chair he took the carefully kept foil top from his jacket pocket, ran his thumb around inside the disc to slightly splay the rim.

He lifted the milk carton from the carrier bag still in the doorway and quietly took it over to the sink, slid over the cleaned glass bottle she'd put beside the draining board. Then he poured the carton milk into the pint bottle and fitted the foil top on.

He couldn't help himself glance through the kitchenette door, to Nan. To check.

Her hands were lifted slightly as she sat, fingers moving as if they worked an unseen till, but she was gazing at the picture of Tadcu, Uncle and the cows. Came back when the filled bottle clinked, as he put it into the door compartment, called through.

- There's the clean bottle for you by the sink.
- Yes, Nan. Got it, thanks. I've put a new one in the fridge.
- Uncle well?
- He's fine.
- Milk round.
- Yes, Nan. He'd like to come and see you but. He's on his own with the cows.
- Yes, he'll be busy.
- Always busy, yes.
- Always the same, with cows.
- Yes, Nan. Always the same. Everything's the same. Everything's still the same.

—

- Thank you for stopping.
- Fine, Ifan, really. Slow job on your own.

Ifan's spanned hand sunk into the fleece at the ewe's pilled haunch, pressed, read the grade of muscle.

- Still going, then.

The car was up on the verge beside the handling area, there beside the road.

- Should never have sold her!

Ifan let the ewe into the left-hand bay.

- Bargain for you there, your Nan got.

The sheep Ifan had graded so far were all in that bay. The right bay was empty.

- Nineteen, *ni'n eisau*. Why not a round twenty I don't know.

He showed the next ewe down the race to Ifan.

- Always fuss, with sheep. Not so much fuss, cows.

Ifan looked up and out as he pressed his hand to the new ewe, visualising the dressed-out carcass. He was looking up visualising, but it seemed he looked at the bright truck that made its way along the single-track road to the chapel clad with scaffold on the opposite hill.

- We won't have to grade them all this rate.

Ifan let the ewe also into the left-hand bay.

- Good spring.
- Not so much that. Just, I've got less animals now. Less animals on the same grass, *ti'mod?*

He nodded at Ifan. Ifan seemed to catch himself up, then.

- Sorry to mention the cows like that. Then. I didn't mean to bring your uncle up for you.

He dismissed it. As if it was nothing. Dug his grip into the next sheep's wool as she went stubborn, felt a faint rip of fleece when he hefted her.

The percussive smack of hammering came over from the chapel.

I can't really picture that, what has to be done to the inside of a chapel to make it somewhere to live in. Thought of the farmhouse. How long would it be before it was sold? Snapped up and its insides stripped out to make a country place for someone. Couldn't stop then the thought of stripped out innards and there was nothing there, when they opened them up, no lesions, but still they had to slaughter the herd, the whole herd, after generations.

- Daughter, you too, isn't it?

He nodded again. The lichen on the breeze block race. Splayed patches. *No signs. There were no signs, nothing on the lungs.*

- Two, see. Better, I think. Grown up now, though. I might have pushed a boy into the farm. I'm glad, *mewn ffordd.*

Ifan received the stubborn ewe.

You'll be another one. You'll work yourself into nothing and then the farm will get eaten up by a rich farm.

- This one too! No surprise mind. Been waiting three weeks to book them in.

No wonder they're grading. His nails burned from pulling at the stubborn ewe.

- What is it, two hours?
- Two hours there, yes. Bit quicker on the way back. With the trailer empty.

Then hours more, to some supermarket butchery, to be put into packets and driven round again. Could even end up back on our doorstep.

The next sheep hovered, leant against the breeze block channel, reluctant to move. He made some primitive noises. Clicked to her. Then he spotted her held-up foreleg.

He leant into the race to get behind the ewe, encourage her on her awkward front leg, felt the bruise in the centre of his palm again as he held his weight on the blocks.

- Bad foot, this one.

The smell of the unhealthy ewe filled his nose. He tightened his mouth as if that would close up his nostrils. Strongarmed her along. Brought a wash of tiredness up him, a loose empty feel, so when Ifan received the hurt ewe and expertly turned her over and sat her up, as if there was no effort in it at all, he couldn't connect it up, the strength.

He got over the hurdle to help hold the ewe, lifted the injured foot.

Ifan dug muck from the concave of the protruded hoof, flicked it off the clippers, bit at the big nail with the blades. Then he spread the toes. His face changed. A quiet patient revulsion.

The stink came up between the toes and out. The compact cream-coloured boil of clotted pus popped with the smallest nick, the ewe bridling as Ifan scraped a small hard node out with the clipper points and the stinking paste of rot globbed down the foot.

He turned from the stench. Turned his head away, felt oxtail bile. It was the smell. That smell. He was trying to hold away the stench of the puss, the decay. More, he was trying to hold away what was coming from it.

He looked down at his palm, pocked from the pressure of the breeze blocks. Thought guiltily of the dented shotgun stock. Maybe I could iron it out. Soak the stock and iron it.

- She's gone backwards, this one.

Ifan could tell just from handling her.

- We'll let her off.

The ewe started kicking. Pedalling into the air. Like to protest this wasn't the fate she wanted. He leant in. Tight wires of wool on her white face. A watery spit of chewed grass. Bright phlegm. There was a notch out of her ear, as if she'd already been marked out.

Ifan hissed spray onto the splayed foot, asked with his eyes down, as he checked the other feet.

- Is your uncle's barn better?

It was as if thinking about the stock had brought the question, about the borrowed gun. They'd taken his uncle's away, after.

- Yes.

He couldn't look at Ifan. Knew he was fond of the old gun.

- Thanks for the lend.

The truck had arrived now at the chapel and the delivery men were unloading a bathroom suite, setting it congregated in front of the door. The ewe's unnaturally blue one foot pointed up to them in exclamation.

- Good little gun for rats, four ten.

—

The brass scope felt different in his hands, with his skin supple from the lanolin.

He checked the time again.

She should be back. They should be back by now. Half day. She should be home.

She could have walked. If the old school was still there. An architects' office now. Same architects doing the chapel. If she didn't have to go to the big shiny new school. She could have just walked. Like I did. Or go on her bike. *Learning to ride on the yard, his uncle's hand steadying the seat.* It's a forty-five-minute run.

No point coming home, in between lifts, for a half day. You'd just have to turn around.

He picked one of last year's crab apples from the ground, shrunk and wrinkled, rolled it in his hand. Pushed distractedly against it. Thought of the puckered knuckles of the pineapple. Nan's hands. Kept his eyes on the far-off road.

It's been an hour. Since she finished. More than an hour.

Bramble was coming into leaf. Lambs bleated across the hill. There was a skylark somewhere.

They're late.

He looked at the road as if he could draw their car onto it. He was trying to hold down a sick nervous feeling. Could taste the oxtail soup.

—

When the car came along he found it in the scope, held it in the circle of the lens as Annie parked at the bungalow, got out, and Mari burst from her seat in the back, ran to kick her football.

A relief waved through him. Just the sight of her.

He had the strange sensation sometimes that the scope itself held Mari. That the world she existed in was *within* the scope. That he could fold the scope down, if he chose to, and carry her away with him.

But I wouldn't. I am not like that. I'd never, whatever they think.

He pushed his heels into the small ridge his feet had formed in the slope after months of him coming there. A mark of place, like the worn patch of lino beneath his chair in the kitchen, his place, ever since Mam had gone, where he'd sat since he was a child, his legs growing year by year down to the floor until they reached, as if putting down roots.

I got angry, but I could never. Not that.

He imagined the thuds of the ball against the bungalow wall, the zip of the boot as Annie opened it, lifted out some bags for life.

Of course, he understood. That's why they're late. They'll have had to go for shopping.

Mini peppers. Cucumber. Shiny veg. He saw the list in his head. It's shiny, all that veg.

—

He opened the lock knife and marked in another groove. The old fence post was bleached, the greyed of the felled trunks that morning.

He was about to stand and head away, drop out of sight and follow the rill to where he'd left the car on the other side of the hill, by a slope of recently planted trees, none taller than the guards around them. But as he pushed the lock tab and closed the knife, leant his weight forward a little to rise, the police car arrived at the bungalow.

Immediate sweat, a stomach churn. His palms oil as two police got from the car. What? Annie at the door before they knocked. Bones of a sudden watery, as if he was unmixing.

He hesitated as he lifted the scope, hand midway through the action, in a gesture that looked aimed to stop something. Warn.

He felt the urge to run. At the same time felt drilled into place.

She can't know. Lifted the scope. Tried to find conviction he would hear through it. She can't have seen me.

They cannot know.

A notebook flicked. A scribbled pen. Annie's ponytail shook. No. A brief scratch in the quickthorn made the sound of the pen's nib, Mari's small face, pressed at the window. No. They cannot know.

Her face right against the glass, then the big sky reflected, as if it came out of her head.

Thumps of adrenalin now.

He thought of everyone knowing. Felt fear. *Thought* of fear, the spate of raids on Post Offices, do not worry, Nan and Tadcu all those years back, *do not worry*. Shotguns. Balaclavas. Of what it would be like to be amongst the products, the shopping, and face a gun and have to really cower. To pray.

Of the police coming.

He felt sick and full of metal. Watched the police walk back to their car, open the doors, get in and drive away.

—

He met the police car as he rounded the lake. Saw the car on the opposite shore, the clean white of the turbines beyond, the low rushes stepping out into the water, two geese folded in the shallows and the sky held in the surface, Mari and the sky like her mind in the window.

Bryn Oerfa. They've been to Bryn. That's the only place up there.

He understood then. They're going house-to-house.

He slowed and pulled in. One of only a few places cars could pass on the narrow road. The gateway cut with quadbike ruts, so the car sat uneasily.

He waited. Bloomed with heat again. A slight chill immediately meeting the edges of his sweat. His neck vein thick, suddenly. Too small.

The worst rusted side won't show. Not how the car is in the gateway like this. They won't look, he told himself. That's not what they're doing, here. They've got better things to do than notice an old car.

The other car neared at a steady, measured pace. As if it didn't want to spook him.

Sit. It's just panic. A fish in his chest. Remember what the doctor said. Say thank you. Thank you, body, for warning me, but it's okay. It's nothing. It is not a lion.

For an insane moment he believed he would spin the car around, flee, or ram the police into the water. Take off on foot.

How would they find me? Dogs? It would be the only way. A hammer percussion in his chest.

But they can't know. Calm yourself. They cannot know yet what it is I am doing.

He looked through the gateway, at the ruts that continued away into the field, a track that had been set.

Briefly, the police car was out of sight behind a lobe in the road, and then it reappeared, slowed, the police waved him an acknowledgement, and passed on with a nod.

—

He got only a few metres before he had to stop the car again, the horrible graunch of the car door, *the cowshed door*, got out and was sick. Hands on knees. Biled. A two-tone slug of goose shit. Blue condom wrapper in the grass. A burst of feathers, closely scattered, fallout of some bird taken as prey.

When the sing of endorphin died back, the air thumped with the turbines, the beat on the breeze from the far ridge, *thwock thwock*, an under-roar that fell into time with his decelerating pulse.

And then he laughed – you mad bastard! Delightedly. You're mad. You're cracked. They do not know. Midges whined above his vomit. Obviously. They do not know – was still laughing when he had to get back in the car and reverse out of the way of a smart people carrier, a family, so he guessed, coming for a stay in the lovely countryside.

–

He held his hands in the cool edge of the river, flexed his fingers. They looked abnormally white in the tan water. The red marks of the carrier bags disappeared.

He was still and engrossed in his hands.

When he looked up, birds had come to drink at a shallow beach across the way. Orange-red, or green-yellow. They were birds he'd never seen before, and in the strange liminal state that early in the morning, they did not seem quite real. They dipped, lifted, tiny clicks, made subdued *djeeps*, the sound of a squeezey dog toy.

When he moved, the birds scattered.

The contained *cuff* of the falls filled the place. Glassy peals of broken water.

There was no green at all on the oaks, tight closed on the steep sides of the gorge. Still late to open.

I'll get up high, through them. Up to the top to see the road.

Birdsong had burst the quietness of the woodland as he'd followed the cwm down. One lone bird, then myriad, as if in praise of him. Less a chorus, more a drumming, an incantation.

By the time he reached the falls, perhaps only because of the previous ceremonial intensity of the song, it had come to feel strangely quiet.

That's something they made fun of, when I was little. He used to think the sun rose because the birds called to it, sang it up.

No-one disabused him. Then he went to school.

It's merciless, school. They tell you it's training for life, but it's not. It's not anything like life.

He studied how his skin looked unnatural in the water, closed his sore hand on a submerged stone that fitted as if designed into his palm. It looked an amphibious colour. Surprised him when it wasn't slick. Take it with you. He lifted it.

Use a stone this time.

His hands were icy. He shook the water from them, then dried them on the woollen balaclava.

The resin the water had not washed off his skin tacked to the fibres. There was that and the lanolin oils from handling the sheep.

The sweat of manhandling the fallen tree hung damp now in his T-shirt. A cold patch under his jumper, stuck against his back.

What are you doing?

The eyeholes of the balaclava seemed just then to gawp at him. Ask disbelief.

No. You do this. It must be done. People need to see. That if things don't stop everything will just be gone, will go. And we will not get it back.

Even the pubs have gone. Chapels. Now the schools.

The little shop.

No.

Stop.

A shiver went through him. A reset.

The orange-red and green-yellow birds had come back. Djeepeed. Supplicating to the water.

Everybody on the list. Everybody who helped the shop. Everyone who was kind. Everyone who misses Nan.

Stop.

Don't fall into that angry thing, now. Get it done.

He picked up the bag. The birds scattered again. He looked up through the oaks.

Get done what you have told yourself you are going to do.

—

A crisp green salad and shell-on prawns.

He kept the supermarket delivery van centred in the scope. It seemed to stall almost, to make the awkward turn up and on to Ffosffin.

It's like a toy. It's like a toy van. It's like a happy little van on children's telly.

The cardboard box under the stairs, with the fire engine, the taxi, racing cars, and the plastic trucks, people figures bigger than vehicles, out of size, giants.

He read the inane cheery claim on the boxy back of the van, watched as the vehicle throttled down on the lane, took the bend, past the handling area, Ifan's sheep, and went out of sight.

—

Ten minutes at Ffosffin with the delivery. They unload the shopping into a wheelbarrow and take it back and forth. Then a few minutes to loop back down the lane to the road.

He'd dropped down off the rise, through the geometric plantation, the soft-cushioned underfoot needled floor, followed the little spots of marker-spray on the trunks to the loose tree he'd left balanced in the early hours.

He strained to listen through the passive *hush* the breeze put through the conifers.

Nothing. Not yet.

Then, little *djeeps* broke the hush, *djeep djeep*, the birds, them, now again, busy, drew his eye to see frail tawny flakes helicoptering around him, nipped from the cones they busied at, *tiny upside-down pineapples*.

He put out a hand but the flake he aimed to catch sailed from the movement, displaced like a small object in water.

And as the flake found the ground, he heard the van.

Its specific motor sound amplified in its tinny carcass.

Yes.

The birds broke away as he moved, his weight against the levered tree, so barely held, spun, so that with one roll, a hard bite into his shoulder and with a creak more metalish than timber the trunk lurched off the slope, snapped an artilleral *crack* as it met the tarmac surface, reared once, and fell still. As the motor sound developed, tone-change, lowered gurn as the van geared down in anticipation. Just around the corner.

He rolled the balaclava, raised the gun, and stepped into the road.

—

When he lifted his hands from the steering wheel, they tacked slightly.

He turned off the engine and, for a moment, there was an intense peace.

He unhooked his left foot from under the seat, stretched it in the space he'd expect to find the clutch.

He took a breath. A moment. Prodded the vehicle tracking device like you might a small dead animal, to check it was really dead. Felt the sharp upturned lip in the plastic where he'd smashed the lock knife in, this time with the river stone. Squeezed his fingers into a fist to feel what he thought almost was yesterday's deserved dull pain in the centre of his hand.

Then he got out and graunched shut the cowshed door, and the place fell into dimness.

It made the other delivery van that was there seem to lurk.

It held him, unnervingly, as he let his eyes adjust. Then he went back to the van he'd just parked, and reached the .410 from the footwell. Perhaps sensing him, the man locked in the goods bay of the van began desperately to shout.

He steeled himself, put back on the balaclava, threateningly bashed the concertinaed side.

- Enough. I'm going to open the hatch. Don't say anything.

The roller side crattled up. The driver was on his knees, gripping the shelves as if the van was still travelling.

- Out.

The driver gripped the shelves like to let go of them would cause him to fall. Like he would drop.

- Out.

He kicked down the foldable step.

In some daze, the driver moved, slowly climbed out. The thickened rubber soles of his shoes looked remedial. Toyish, like the van itself.

The driver was cramped and shaking. His lip jabbered. When he saw the other van, a pathetic sob went through him.

- There's no money.
- Have any people brought freezer bags?

The driver didn't understand.

- Someone's bought freezer bags?

They had. Several people had.

- All the stuff with the supermarket name on. Go crate by crate. In a packet with the supermarket on. Take it out. Take it out of the packaging and put it into freezer bags. If they are tins and things you can't do that with put them to one side.

The thick lenses of the driver's glasses went briefly opaque.

That's what happens. It's what happens at the moment an animal dies. Its eyes go out.

He raised the shotgun. Felt the pattern of the wool in his skin as he pressed the stock to his cheek.

- Please.
- Crate by crate. Separate everything out.

—

He couldn't smell the cowshed through the balaclava. Just the damp clothes smell. He couldn't feel the dryness of the cowshed. He was sweating. His hands slick on the gun.

There was the sweat, and the grease of the lanolin, and the resin tack, and the starch effect of the grain, from when he'd swapped out the lead from the cartridges.

It was nearly done.

- Not the bottled water. Keep some toilet roll.

The driver was on his knees amongst the boxes. Packaging strewn, blatant. The driver's childish thickened upturned soles.

- Tuna. Do you like tuna?

Tight dapples of light came now through the clustered holes the shot had made in the galvanised wall behind the chair when his uncle pulled the trigger. Bright solid pellets.

He tried to block the thought out.

Tried to unhear the detail, the flies. He shouldn't know. The holes. He couldn't dislodge the thought, they'd eaten through the wall to get in. To get at him.

Stop.

- Tuna.

A discarded bakery item bag uncurled on the floor, as if of its own accord. As if it would unravel and scuttle across the cowshed floor.

The driver looked incoherent. Again a sob, more a choke, came up.

He checked the own-brand cans to see they had ring pulls. Bananas. A bag of already chopped carrots. Own-brand sliced loaf.

- Jam?

The driver was crying now. Full-on crying.

- Do you want jam?

—

He passed in the torch and brought down the roller side.

There was a sudden silence in the cowshed.

The hair on his nape stiffened.

It felt the silence came profoundly from, was generated actually by the other van.

He gazed at the re-sorted goods. Re-bagged meat, grey through thin blue plastic. The discarded packaging across the ground, *strewn feathers from a taken bird*. Slim scattered straw. A desiccated pellet of cow cake, *goose shit*.

And then a sobbing broke out from the latest van by which he still stood. A sort of bovine moan. Then a sudden din. A crazy batter. Like the clang of a loose gate. A noise that cracked at his skull. The white bonnet. *White police car*, a sudden compression, overtaking, doubt buzzed. The horrible flies.

- Enough!

The light through the holes in the wall fell in rods, white tunnels of dust.

- Enough!

The deep silence came back. Again seemed to come from the other van.

He went over. Approached as if the van would shy, or bolt, kick out like an unnerved animal.

Why is he so quiet? He was mad yesterday, he raged.

He patted the roller door with the butt of the shotgun. Nothing. Sailed for a moment on a horrible soupy uncertainty. Tried to secure himself to the ground. Then he undid the latch, *it's not a lion*, barrels levelled as the door scaled up.

The stink of shit and urine hit him. Came through his uncovered mouth, came as taste.

The driver squatted crouched on the diminished case of sparkling water bottles. He'd more or less demolished the inside of the bay. Gouged where he'd tried with the frames of the racks to lever away the side panels. His hands cut.

Blood dried on the van floor. Crusted on his uniform.

The driver looked so slight, even in the tiny goods bay. His body contorted between the mangled lengths of angled metal.

The driver just stared. Stared at the gun. Looked back at him with blank disgust.

He relowered the door. Lifted off the balaclava. Everything was spinning now. Try to get a hold. It's choice. It's a choice. You've done this.

Everyone on the list. You have to do everyone on the list. If nothing more.

Thought of Nan. Thought of the wiry carpet tiles, the blunt nose of the struggling ewe. Tried to grip some detail from the day to hold to. Like the doctor'd said. Green-yellow birds. The bags. The stacks. Taken stock. Boxes all around the floor.

But the cowshed was alternately compressing, shrinking and expanding, chasmic. The walls.

He looked up at the spattered holes, the tight dots of light. *They ate him. They came in and ate him.*

- What do we do now? What are you going to do now?

The driver's shouted question echoed in the van. Contained. Words clattered. Flies.

- What now?

In his head. Little holes.

- What happens?

Burst out.

Spinning.

- What?

Spinning.

- What happens now?