

A RHYTHM OF SIX

He was excited at first. After all, he'd just made his name – and a fairly substantial amount of money – selling a script about ghost stories to a producer. Now the flat he'd used the money to buy apparently had a ghostly apparition of its own.

Well, not so much an apparition; more a noise. I felt certain he was talking crap. He told me it made a tapping noise. As someone who lives in an old Victorian tenement with piping more than a hundred years old, I wasn't buying it; just turning on the central heating was like unleashing a symphony of slow spoon players. The incessant clicks and clacks could go on all night.

It was then that he moved his coffee cup and tapped out a rhythm: *tap t-t-t-tap tap*. That's the noise it would make. It could happen at any time, day or night, coming from somewhere in the flat. "The rhythm of six" he called it. Always the same, never different. It would come from somewhere far away, never near where he was. And as soon as he went looking for it, it would stop.

I didn't believe him, and he knew I wouldn't. So he invited me over to come and see for myself. I was a little sceptical, not just because I didn't believe him, but because I thought that this might be some pretext for him to try something.

We had been close friends once, but then, after quite a long time of us being friends, he had got drunk and announced his "love" for me. It was quite definitely not what I wanted to hear. I'd never really thought of him as someone I'd want to go out with. I was seeing someone when we became friends, and I was seeing someone when he suddenly said he was in love with me.

I suppose I'd always found him a bit too much work. He was fun to spend time with, to talk to, but he could get pretty clingy. He barely let his last girlfriend out of the house – he liked your undivided attention because he wasn't very confident. And if you ignored him or didn't pay enough attention to him, he could get a bit sulky and offish.

I'd known worse, gone out with worse, but he never really seemed my type. I'd enjoyed spending time with him, we were decent friends – I thought. He'd made a bad lunge for me, and held on too tightly and a bit too long when I told him to let go. It wasn't a side to him that I'd seen before, and I didn't like it.

We didn't talk for a long time after that. And it was only when we started living nearby again, about a year ago, that we patched things up. Things were good between us, but he didn't have many friends in the area, so I saw him quite a lot, and knew he wanted a little more from me. It was a bit obvious.

I went along with it any way, I thought we had to get past this awkwardness – and I did genuinely like him; we'd had good times. A nice inexpensive night in with him and his DVD collection actually seemed nice, as long as he didn't try anything.

Anyway, we got take-out – pizza and chips – and put on some movies, a mixture of the good and bad. But not with the sound on loud – he didn't want me to miss it if we heard the tapping. I really didn't give a toss about it, and just went on eating and drinking and talking.

We were half way through taking the piss out of Keanu Reeves in *Point Break* when he suddenly cried: "There it is!"

"What?"

"The tapping." He grabbed the remote and stopped the movie.

"Did you hear it?"

I had the feeling I might have heard a knock or something, but I didn't want to over-play its significance. But Craig was adamant I had heard the ghost.

“It could’ve just been the pipes.”

“It’s June, the heating’s off and none of the taps are on.”

I wasn’t buying it, but I could see that this was no joke. He honestly believed something was going on. He was getting all worked up; what mysteries could his home be hiding? Who had lived here before? What had happened to them? What kind of restless spirit lived here?

It was a bit sad how quickly the sceptic had become a convert. He’d started to really believe the kind of things he was writing about. I teased him about it; he admitted his imagination was running away with him, but he promised me that there was something, and that he wasn’t just making it up. I told him he should contact that fool on the telly, the one who goes into people’s homes to talk to the dead. He laughed at the suggestion – at least he hadn’t become a complete believer.

We finished watching Christopher Lee in *The Devil Rides Out* at about half-past midnight and there was still no sound from the so-called ghost.

It was then that he said I should stay the night – it almost always made some noise in the night time. Considering our past, this was something I did not really want to do.

But it was tipping it down outside – typical British summer weather. The thought of staying made me a bit uncomfortable, but the lazy part of me was already thinking: it’s wet, it’s a bit of a walk, you’re pretty drunk and you can’t afford a taxi. Besides, it was probably safer to stay here than go out into the streets this late when clearly plastered.

He sensed doubt on my part, so he said, “I’m not going to try anything; I’ll put up the fold-up bed in the library, you can lock the door if you want to.”

So I consented and he set up the bed for me. His library was in the small second bedroom. As he put the bed up, I couldn’t help notice just how much stuff he had based around the occult. Books about witchcraft, hauntings, pagans; all the classic ghost story authors: M.R.James, Poe, Le Fanu, Stoker... and suspicious things by sinister folk like Aleister Crowley and Anton LaVey. I didn’t believe in any of this stuff, but to be surrounded by so many tomes about nasty things was a little bit unsettling. It also made me wonder whether he’d fallen under their spell just a little, and had started to be swept up by it after all.

I didn’t sleep well, but I put that down to the booze. I phased in and out; hard to know how long I was sleeping. I woke myself up properly and tried again. I ended up reading DVD sleeves in the moonlight. There was probably every Hammer Horror known to man, multiple versions of *The Amityville Horror* – even that movie they banned after the Jamie Bulger murder (bootleg of course).

I got up after a while to get some water. I moved in the dark to the kitchen and put on the light after a little searching. I grabbed a glass and turned on the cold water tap. The water was massively over-pressured and it spat out with a thump, hitting the bottom of my glass with enough force to splash onto my t-shirt. I turned it off quickly, swearing loudly, before wiping myself down with a tea towel – Craig had warned me about the tap earlier.

As I tried to wipe water up from the counter, I heard something. It was the slightest sound of tapping; not loud, but it was there.

I scoffed – it was the pipes after all. That idiot! I turned on the over-pressured tap again – it splashed heavily against the dirty dishes in the sink, getting me wet again. But I turned it off quickly and waited for the sound of knocking.

I was sure I’d got it, but then nothing happened. I waited for more than a minute. I was so sure I’d found the source, but nothing was heard.

That didn’t prove anything though; the tap was still probably the most likely explanation. I filled my glass with water from the hot tap instead. I waited a little then too, but there was no sound.

I started to walk out of the kitchen, and then I heard it:

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap.

I stopped still. That wasn't the sound of a pipe; it sounded like someone tapping on a wall or a table. Quite clearly in a rhythm; no clumsy clunking or banging.

I immediately assumed Craig was taking the piss, so I walked quickly out into the hall to see if he was there. It was empty and dark. I looked both ways, down to the bedroom at the end of the hall, and back across the landing to the living room. All seemed quiet and empty.

What had he said? It always stops when you go looking for it... Now it was giving me the willies. I felt a shiver and suddenly thought it would be best to go back to my room and hope the dark words of the occultists might protect me.

I walked forward a little, past the door to the bathroom. There it was again, behind me:

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap.

It came from the landing, I was sure of it. I spun around and saw a figure – I almost screamed, but after a second realised that it was the hat-stand.

I exhaled and shook my head. I chuckled slightly at myself and turned back towards the library.

There it was again: *tap-t-t-t-tap tap.*

It was from the stair bannister, creeping along the surface, getting closer to me with each tap.

I inhaled quickly – then it came again, from the bathroom door right next to me:

Tap-t-t-t-tap...

...TAP – right on my shoulder! Like someone poking me hard in the back.

I span around in a fright and tripped over the end of the rug in the hallway. I fell over backward with a screech, throwing my arms up in the air. My glass of water splattered dramatically over the wall. The glass, by some miracle, didn't smash – it landed with a thud on the carpet and rolled up to the door of Craig's bedroom.

I tried to get up, but as I scrambled to my feet all I did was roll the rug up under me. I stumbled again and fell back on the floor with a thump.

The door opened and Craig came out into the hall: "What the hell's going on?"

"It touched me," I screamed. "The thing touched me!"

He took me into the living room and, rather quaintly, thought that what I needed was some warm milk to calm me down.

He accused me of imagining it because I was drunk. I almost hit the roof: "I felt it! It touched my shoulder. You expected me to believe you; now you won't believe me!"

He said I should calm down: "All it did was touch you. That's not so bad."

"He didn't touch me, he poked me!"

"Well, how do you know it's a 'he'? Maybe it's a 'she'?"

"Oh you'd love that wouldn't you? A jealous she-spirit who wants you." Sounded like the kind of thing he'd try to make a story out of.

Despite my distress he was clearly very excited. I'd experienced it too, so there was no question now. It was real! He was suddenly in his element. It was time to research, find out about the house's history, who'd lived there before, what crimes had taken place in the area – maybe unsolved?

He'd missed something obvious: "What about the people who live downstairs?"

"There's no one – it's been empty since I got here. Maybe this is why it's not for sale – there's no sign. I bet it's something that happened in the house below."

It struck me instantly that he was very much in his own fictional world. That he was actually living out one of his own stories and that he was going to approach this like a work of fiction. I tried to point this out, but he said he'd studied ghost hunting and knew what it was that psychical researchers do when they hear about phenomena.

I didn't dare point out that most of that was made up too – guesswork that lent itself to mankind's natural capacity for making sense of things by making a story. But then I thought, well,

what if it isn't all nonsense? I had just been poked in the shoulder. And I hadn't imagined it – I wasn't that drunk, surely?

I didn't sleep well the rest of that night as you can imagine. I kept having this unpleasant feeling that I was being watched. I think I was just being paranoid. But there was something in that house; something had touched me. I knew it. I didn't wait around for breakfast; I walked home and climbed quickly back into my own bed for comfort.

I didn't see Craig for a week or so after that. This wasn't deliberate – the thing at his place hadn't scared me that badly; I just had accountancy exams coming up and needed to revise. I got a phone call from him after a few days saying he was trying to contact the previous owners of the flat. The estate agents wouldn't let him contact them without themselves acting as go-between, but he was sure their address was on the paperwork somewhere. He remembered being told they had emigrated back to India, so it would be a while, one way or another, before he would hear from them.

He was also going to go to the town library to see if he could find any interesting references to the building and had contacted someone at the local historical society for any interesting things that had happened on the road. Some of the buildings were noticeably newer than some of the others and he'd wondered whether they'd been bombed in the war. Was this the restless spirit of someone trapped in the wreckage? Someone who had tried to make a noise so they could be rescued, but had not been heard in time?

He was so keen to make a narrative out of it.

He called on me again after my exams were over, under the guise of asking how it went. But quickly he wanted to update me on how things were progressing with his ghost hunt. I couldn't help but be jealous that he had all this time on his hands to spend chasing his fantasies.

The latest news was that he'd written to the flat's previous owners in India, having found their address, and was looking into finding a way to trick the council into giving him the address of the owners of the empty flat downstairs.

His historical research of the area had come to nothing as of yet; no suspicious goings on to speak of. Yes, some houses had been bombed in the war – but just down the street, not close by. The man at the historical society had been very friendly, but he didn't have anything "juicy" for him. He did, however, know someone who was researching a spiritualist guide to the area, and that he would contact him on Craig's behalf. So something good could come of that.

Then Craig stopped silent for a moment. "There it is again," he said. "The rhythm of six."

He said he'd be in touch soon and hung up. Later that night he texted me asking if I wanted to come over the evening after. I suggested an earlier time – somehow I didn't want to go over there again and be around when night fell.

I called around at about two in the afternoon. He invited me up and almost as soon as I had reached the top of the stairs there it was:

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap.

"I knew it," he said with relish.

"Knew what?"

"It doesn't like you."

"What?"

He walked me into the living room. "I think it reacts when you're here."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm here all the time. It never bothers me. I hear it hanging around, making its noise, but it's always in the background. You show up and suddenly it gets all agitated. Starts doing its tapping loud – did you hear how sharp and clear that was?"

"Oh come on Craig – you're letting your mind run away with you."

“And it does it when I’m on the phone to you. It’s like, when I’m on the sofa, just watching TV and it makes its noise, does the tapping, it’s like it’s just reminding me it’s there. You know, like it doesn’t want me to forget about it. But I start talking to you and suddenly it’s banging its fingers down in a mood.”

“Just stop it Craig. Seriously, just stop it! You’re starting to freak me out.”

“But get this: haven’t you noticed how cold it is?”

“What?”

“When you came in the flat; it’s suddenly gone cold”.

“It was cold when I came in.”

“It’s June – it’s 24 degrees outside. Why would it be cold in here?”

“It’s not that cold in here,” I lied – it was chilly. “Look, I don’t want to talk about this. Can’t we go out somewhere, get a coffee or something?”

“Not yet, I brought you here to help me with something.”

“With what?” I hissed.

“I want to take a look downstairs.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“The backdoor isn’t locked properly. The bolt is unlocked; I think I can wriggle the other lock with a credit card or a scraper.”

“You want to break in!”

“I climbed out the bedroom window last night and got down there – look.”

He took me into his bedroom. Directly under the window was the roof of part of the flat below.

He opened the window: “I just climbed out and dropped down; it’s easy.”

“You just walked out onto the roof? Are you crazy?”

“It’s perfectly safe. I remember the estate agent telling me that the old owners wanted to build a balcony up here, but they weren’t given planning permission.”

“That doesn’t mean the roof is already strong enough!”

“It supported my weight yesterday.”

“You’re so irresponsible.”

“I need you to keep a lookout for me while I try to get the door open.”

“Absolutely not, I’m not having anything to do with this.”

“Come on, where’s your spirit of adventure?”

“This isn’t a game Craig. You’re breaking into someone’s house.”

“It’s empty.”

“It’s still a crime. What if someone catches you?”

“We’ll just say we thought we smelt gas. Better yet, we could tell them that we’d left a tap on and were concerned there might be water damage downstairs.”

“I can’t believe you’re trying to do this.”

“I’d rather you help me, but I’m doing this without you if I have to. I’d rather you were there, that way I can know if the neighbours are coming.”

“What do you even expect to find?”

“I don’t know. When you investigate you have to rule out the dead-ends first.”

“You’ve read too many detective books.”

“Are you coming?”

I thought it was stupid and crazy, but part of me did want to give it a go because I was curious about what was going on. And it was sort of daring breaking into someone’s home – stupid though it was. Besides, I was afraid he would get into more trouble, or that something bad would happen to him. It was cold in his flat; something was not right here.

I let him walk out on the roof first – I wasn't going to let both our weights risk making it break. He got to the end and carefully lowered himself down to ground level.

"There's a bench here you can drop yourself on to; it's really easy."

With reluctance I climbed out onto the roof, which thankfully did not groan or creak. I walked to the edge as he suggested and lowered myself down onto a rusty cast-iron bench. The garden was overgrown with thick grass and weeds – no one had been here in quite some time.

It was left, around the side of the house, to the back door. Craig was already there, trying to force the door with a credit card. I didn't like that the old wooden fence panels behind him were coming loose and that there were gaps between them where we could easily be seen.

"This is going to break my card," Craig said.

I looked through the gaps into the garden next door. It was paved over, a depressing grey and tired looking place, with a rusty bike and broken garden furniture – but at least there was no one there.

"Hurry up," I said.

He was trying the paint scraper now, forcing it into the gap between the door and frame. He wiggled it a little, then made a fist with his other hand and struck the top of the scraper's handle. The door opened with a loud creak. "Get in quick," I gasped.

I virtually pushed him inside, slamming the door closed behind us.

What we found was a disappointment. The kitchen and living room had an open corridor between them, with the bathroom sitting between. Then down the hallway were two bedrooms – Craig's place had a much better layout.

But there was nothing remarkable about the place at all. It was empty, nothing on the walls or floor, no left-behind furniture or waste. Just a clean, empty home.

"Well, was this what you were expecting?" I said sharply.

"There's nothing..."

"In an unoccupied house? No kidding."

"No, but there's literally nothing. This place is spotless. There's not a mark or... a scrape or scuff. It all looks brand new. Look at the floor... And walls, no marks, no wear, no dirt..."

I took a step into the kitchen – it all looked pretty sparkling now that he mentioned it. I ran my finger across one of the countertops. There wasn't even any dust.

"It's brand new, completely re-decorated". It was quite warm too; not chilly like upstairs.

He waved his finger in the air. "Something happened here."

"Yeah, they did the place up to sell it."

"But it's not on the market."

"How do you know? Just cos there's no sign outside."

"I checked online, it's not listed anywhere."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"I think something happened. Something bad; something bad enough for whoever owns the place to want to do it over completely. To wipe the slate clean. But even now, they're too afraid to put it on the market. Because of what happened."

"You're just making it up. You don't know any of that. Stop writing a story out of this. You don't know any of this—"

"Hey, hey, ghosts and stuff – that's my specialist field. Trust me; I know what I'm talking about."

"It's all rubbish. You're talking rubbish. All this crap about it going cold and it getting aggravated – you don't know any of that. You're just guessing and making it up as you go along. You don't know anything Craig, you don't know a damn thing!"

He was about to answer back angrily – his mouth opened wide – but then we heard a loud creak.

We both looked up to the ceiling – there were footsteps. Short, gentle, creaking footsteps above, in Craig’s flat.

We both looked at each other – then we dashed to the doorway. Craig threw it open and slammed it shut behind me. He was up on the roof at an incredible speed, more athletic than I’d ever seen him. It took me longer to pull myself up from the bench and scramble through the window.

He was stood in the hallway looking around. “Nothing,” he said. “There’s no one here.”

I didn’t know what to say, I just stood there, in his bedroom doorway, out of breath.

We listened quietly for a moment, looking up and down the hall and across the landing.

“There has to be some logic behind it,” he said pointing at me. “Whatever’s going on, there has to be some logic behind it.”

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap.

It was quite loud. I couldn’t tell where it had come from.

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap.

“Who’s there?” I said carefully. Craig looked at me with surprise.

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap – louder.

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap – louder still.

I walked towards him. “Where’s it coming from?” I hissed.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly.

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap – becoming a thundering drumbeat.

I was trembling: “Let’s get out of here”.

Tap-t-t-t-tap tap.

Tap-t-t-t-tap-TAP – the bathroom mirror leapt from the wall. It bounced off the edge of the sink and crashed onto the bathroom tiles, smashing into pieces.

The noise stopped. Glass was all over the floor – it hadn’t just broken, it had exploded into pieces. Even the frame looked like it was torn apart.

Craig stepped over it, and picked up two of the frame’s pieces – they were joined by the picture wire used to hang it. It hadn’t snapped, and the hook was still in the wall.

It had literally flown off its own hook.

“We need to get out of here.”

“It’s all right,” he whispered. “I think it’s ok now.”

“I don’t care what you think!” I cried. “I want to get out of here now!”

He paused for breath. “Yes, all right” he said. He went for his keys and we made a hasty exit.

We went to a café a few streets away, wanting to put a fair bit of distance between ourselves and the flat. It was a Greek place that was pretending to be Italian; we just ordered coffee, neither of us felt like eating.

“That settles it then,” he said.

“Settles what?”

“It’s a poltergeist, not a ghost. Ghosts are benign, this thing reacts. It can be angry and destructive.”

He took a sip of coffee. “You’re not on your period are you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, they can react to changes in the body, especially sexual ones.”

“I’m 31, Craig, I’m not going through fucking puberty.”

With a line like that, it wasn’t surprising that people started to look at us. We should’ve gone somewhere quieter.

“What are you going to do?” I asked him.

"I don't know." He was scared now. This thing was no longer fun or extraordinary; it was a problem. A problem he really couldn't explain, not with all his books and horror movie trivia.

"I think it's best you don't come over any more," he said with a slight tremble in his voice.

"I think so too. But I'll have to go back over with you now because I've left my bloody handbag there."

We sat drinking for a moment or two in silence.

"Exorcism's probably the best thing."

"Moving is probably the best thing."

"I can't just move. You can't just pull out of a mortgage."

"You could say that the owner concealed information about the place from you."

"And what? Sue them for not saying there's a ghost living there? We've got to get rid of it somehow."

He finished his coffee. "At least we've both seen it. No one can just tell me I'm crazy."

I walked with him back to the flat. He said he'd bring my handbag out to me, but, and I don't know why, I suddenly felt defiant – I would come in and get my handbag. Whatever this thing was, I wanted to show it I was not afraid. Though my fearlessness didn't take me beyond the landing at the top of stairs.

"Where'd you leave it?" he asked.

"On the sofa I think."

He walked into the living room. I stood nervously waiting.

"Are you sure? I can't see it."

"Definitely," I was about to go in there and get it myself, but I heard the floor creak behind me.

I turned and saw it – an old man, grey-skinned and bony, walking into the library. He was stick-thin, bald, with liver spots and totally naked. But not just naked, clammy, almost sticky looking – he had almost no colour at all. Just faded, slimy and grey.

"Craig!" I screamed. Terrified and repulsed, I still ran towards the library after it. But as you might guess, when I got there, there was nothing. Craig thundered across the floor after me, arriving in the library as I went around the bookcases trying to see it.

"What was it?"

"It's here, I saw it. It's an old man. A disgusting old man!"

I didn't stay long after that. I made him promise that he'd call someone, anyone who could help, first thing in the morning, Monday. But I should've known that that was far too sensible a thing for him to do. When I called that evening, he excitedly told me that he'd visited his local electronic store and bought himself a whole bunch of recording equipment.

"Are you crazy?" I yelled.

"Look, I need proof. No one is going to believe me if I go and tell them I've heard bumps in the night and that my mirror has jumped off the wall. But if I record something, then I can be taken seriously and, I dunno, maybe get some proper researchers around."

I almost slammed down the phone.

But then I wondered if I'd been watching too many movies too. It hadn't really done much before, why should it suddenly mind or care if cameras were put up in the house? Life isn't like Paranormal Activity – he could just leave the house if things got bad, couldn't he?

It was all just guesswork; nobody really knew anything.

There seemed to be only one thing that was certain – it didn't like me. All the worst things had happened when I was there. Perhaps if I just stayed away, nothing would happen. I shuddered at the thought of it. To be desired by a disgusting old man from beyond the grave. It made me want to have a shower.

I didn't feel like being in the house alone that night. Milly, my housemate, was out touring Faust with her opera company, so it felt uncomfortably quiet. I put on a series of the Sopranos and started on some red wine to help myself relax.

I fell asleep at some point; I don't know what time. I woke up with a start at around 3:30 am; the TV had turned itself off, but my mobile was still on and it was vibrating its way towards the edge of the coffee table. I picked it up – it was Craig.

"Hello," I groaned.

"I'm coming over!"

"What?"

"It's gone fucking mental!" He was out of breath.

"What?"

"It's gone mental; I think it's going to kill me!"

"Craig, are you running?"

"I'll be there in a minute... I need somewhere to stay. I can't go back there."

He was on my doorstep dripping wet with rain and sweat just minutes later. He could barely talk; he was struggling so hard to catch his breath. I took his coat, but had no dry clothes to give him. He was wearing slippers; he must've just thrown on whatever came to hand. I put his slippers and coat in the dryer. I gave him a towel for his face and hair and sat him next to a fan heater in the kitchen while I put on the kettle.

"It went beserk!" he said, shivering.

"What do you mean, beserk?" I asked with a lump in my throat.

"I set up three cameras; one in the hall, one in my bedroom and one in the living room. Just cameras on tripods, nothing special, set to record for as long as they could."

"You wanted it on video – for fame and glory purposes?"

"I wanted proof! You don't understand; I went online, I looked around. People, nutters, they say stuff like this all the time. No one takes you seriously unless you've got video or the word of an expert; and any expert requires that you get cleared by a psychiatrist first before they'll even consider anything you say to be true. Catching it on tape would've shown anyone that I wasn't lying!"

His eyes were red and his face pale – he looked desperate and terrified.

"I went to sleep. Nothing was happening, I just dozed off. Slept for a couple of hours and then BANG! I don't know what it was, but it was loud, like someone hitting a steel container with a hammer. I jumped out of bed and then it started. Rhythm of six: Tap-t-t-t-tap tap, faster and faster, louder and louder until the floor started to shake. The doors rattled on their hinges. The pictures began to fall to the floor."

"It was insane; I couldn't take it, so I screamed: Stop it! Stop it! Please stop it! And it did. Just for a moment there was no sound. Nothing at all. I walked out into the hall. All the lights were on – you know what I'm like; I never forget stuff like that."

"So I'm seriously freaked out. I'm thinking, what the hell's going on? I looked at the camera, set up on the landing and suddenly it leaps three feet in the air, like someone just kicked it. And then it happens behind me to the one in the bedroom. And then the lights go out – they blow out one by one."

"I run back into my bedroom. God knows why, I swear to you, like a child, I tried to hide under the bed. I don't know why there; I just wanted to take cover. But then everything was quiet again for a moment. Just a moment, before it started up again: tap-t-t-t-tap tap, tap-t-t-t-tap tap."

"It was hurting my head. The sound of it! But then after a moment, I realised something. That it hurt my head because it was in my head. The rhythm of six was in my head, beating away like a

headache, throbbing in my mind. It wasn't in the flat any more, it was in my brain. I swear to God it was in my head."

"I believe you..."

"I couldn't tell where it was coming from – because it was in my mind."

"Craig, I believe you – you're doing it now!"

His left hand was on the kitchen table; while he was speaking he'd started to tap against it. Without even thinking, his hand had been tapping away: tap-t-t-tap tap.

He lifted his left hand straight away and put it in his right hand to examine it, almost as if it was something foreign.

"I was, wasn't I?" He put both hands over his mouth. "Jesus Christ, it's in me. It's inside of me!"

I went to him and put my hands on his shoulders. "It's all right, it's all right. You can't hear it now can you?"

"No, my head's clear," he was almost in tears.

The kettle had boiled. I walked over to it and tried to think rationally.

"What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

"You can't go back there. You just can't." I made his tea and brought it over to him. He took it with his hands shivering, like he'd been out in the cold for hours.

"We need to get you a doctor."

"I'm not mad!"

"You're hearing things in your head, never mind the state this has got you in. See a doctor; I don't think you're crazy, but you're not well are you?"

After a moment's silence, he said: "Fine". I don't think he had the will to argue.

I sat with him for half an hour but I was keen to get him to sleep. He needed it and we needed to calm down and think more sensibly about the problem. You have a home you can't go back to, what would you do? Assuming it was a normal problem and not a fucking ghost.

I put him to bed on the sofa, next to a hot chocolate. I took the duvet from Milly's room; she wouldn't like him sleeping in there, but probably wouldn't mind him using the duvet. Despite the stress he seemed to fall asleep quite quickly – far quicker than I did. I remembered going to see him part way through the night, just as the dark was starting to brighten. He was sleeping but not soundly; he was wriggling and shuffling.

As I went to the bathroom I even heard him mutter something, something unintelligible. I wondered if it really was in there with him? Something supernatural, something rotten and cruel.

I watched him for a little while after. He was unsettled, but he didn't seem to be distressed or having a nightmare, at least not that I could tell.

I fell asleep not that long after climbing back into bed. I slept soundly till about ten-thirty, when I shuffled myself out from under the sheets and went to check on Craig.

To my horror, he was gone. The duvet was lying on the floor; his coat and slippers were gone. I shouted for him, but there was no answer. I tried his mobile – again, no answer.

I suddenly felt an overwhelming feeling of dread – he'd gone back, hadn't he? Why? For some of his things, or worse? If this thing was in his head, had it made him go back? Forced him?

I didn't know, but I knew I had to get over there. I threw on some clothes, grabbed my keys and phone, and made a run for it. The air outside was damp and muggy; I was dripping sweat by the time I reached the end of the road. The distance to his had never seemed so long before, and every part of the journey conspired to make it take longer: roadworks, traffic lights, old people, no one stopping at the zebra crossing – I just ran out and took my chances. I had to get to Craig's.

As I reached his street, I knew something had gone badly wrong. As I ran towards his doorway, I could see it hanging open. I ran into the inside hallway, where I found Craig slumped against the door frame at the bottom of the stairs.

“Craig!” I screamed.

To my relief he heard me; his eyes arose slowly and he tried to shuffle into a seated position.

“What happened?”

“I tried to leave,” he said weakly. “I tried to leave and it wouldn’t let me!” A tear fell across his cheek. “It’s in my heart!”

“We’ve got to get you out of here.”

“No, don’t, don’t!” he cried. “It’s in my heart Laura. I tried to leave and it stopped my heart. And then all I could feel in my chest was the rhythm of six; I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t breathe!”

“I’m calling an ambulance.”

“No, I’ll be fine. I just have to get back inside.”

“Stay there!”

“He won’t hurt me if I go back inside.”

I dialled 999 hurriedly, walking outside to get out of the cramped hallway.

“Hello, this is emergency services. What service do you require?”

“Ambulance, now please.”

“And what is the nature of the emergency?”

“My friend, his heart’s failed or something. He collapsed, and now he can barely breathe, says it’s his heart.”

“Ok, I’m going to need your name and address?”

“My name is Laura _____. I’m at...” I had to look at the door. “45 _____, Clapham South.”

“Ok Laura, and what’s the name of your friend?”

“It’s Craig, Craig _____. Please hurry, he’s – Craig!”

He’d moved. He wasn’t at the bottom of the stairs, but had started to crawl his way up again.

“Craig, come back!”

“It’s all right,” he said, while pulling himself to his feet by gripping the bannister. “I’m going to be ok.”

“Get back down here right now.” I ran into his flat and up the stairs without thinking – without seeing.

When I reached the top, I threw out my arms to grab him. But something swept me aside; a great arm came from nowhere. I’m not even sure I even really saw it, or whether I just imagined I had.

It struck me in the chest and sent my head back and my feet forward. I went head over heels down the stairs, tumbled all the way down.

My world went spinning; I hit the door as I smacked against the floor at the bottom, pushing it closed. I landed leaning against it, my head just about propped up.

I tried to lift myself up, but I was too dizzy; I felt part of me was still turning.

My vision was distorted, blurred, but I could see Craig; he was on his knees.

“Please!” he wailed. A figure was stood before him, grey and long, arch-backed. Its long-fingered hand grabbed him by the shirt collar and forced him flat on the ground as it bent down over him. With the other hand, it stroked its fingers across his cheek.

I can still remember the shape of its face, grinning, stretched and narrow; its broken and brittle teeth like shards of glass. It wrapped its arms around him in a disgusting embrace and lay down on top of him.

That’s when I passed out.

A broken wrist and a sprained ankle – all things considered, I got off lucky. I woke up probably just a few minutes later, as they were pushing me on a gurney into an ambulance. I cried out for

Craig, but they didn't want to tell me anything at the time. It was an hour or so later when I learned that he was dead.

I didn't know what to tell the police. Of course they were called; his flat smashed up, all the bulbs broken. I couldn't tell them the truth, the truth was ridiculous. I edited it down to say that last night he had come to mine complaining of words in his head. And that then I had found him at his home in a state. They didn't believe me, but it didn't matter since heart failure is considered a natural death; it's only suspicious in men of his age. Apparently his heart just stopped.

I felt terrible about not telling the truth, especially to his parents. But what good would this story do them? That's why I've put it all down in writing, so that I can tell the truth, just once. Tell it just how it was, without a single lie.

But now I think this will have to be my epitaph too. I can hear him. Hear him in the walls tapping away, playing his little game. You see, I know what he is now – he's a hunter. A man who likes to stalk and torment his prey, before making his move, springing his trap.

It started straight after the funeral, just a little tapping in the distance. Barely noticeable, but noticed. He likes to play games. I'm going to have to try and out-run him. He's not in my head yet. I'm going to leave here and see how fast he can travel, how far he can go.

I feel bad for Milly. Maybe he'll wait here for her. But I don't think so. I think once he's found his mark, I don't think he lets go.

Then I'll be number eight. You see, I know exactly how many he's killed. Because now he makes a rhythm of seven, instead of six.

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