

'Any reader with a heart will weep buckets'
Sunday Times

MOONRISE



Carnegie Medal Winner

SARAH
CROSSAN

BLOOMSBURY

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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

THE FIRST CALL

The green phone
on the wall in the hall
hardly ever rang.
Anyone who wanted to speak to Mom called her cell.
Same with Angela.

I listened to the jangle for a few seconds
before picking it up.
'Hello?'

'Joe?' It was Ed.
He hadn't been in touch for weeks.
I'd started to worry,
wondered if he was ever coming home.
'Is Angela there?' he asked.
He was breathing fast
as though someone were chasing him.
In the background
 hard voices,
 a door slamming.

'Angela's at soccer practice,' I said.

'And Mom?'

The front door opened and Mom stormed in
carrying a bag of groceries
for my sister to conjure into dinner.

‘The police got Ed!’ I shouted.

I held out the phone.
She snatched it from me,
dropping the bag.

A tangerine rolled across the rug.
I picked it up,
the skin cold and rough.

‘Ed? What’s going on? ...
But how can they make that sort of mistake? ...
Don’t shout at me, I’m just ...
No, I know, but ...
I don’t have the money for ...
Ed, stay calm ...
I’ll call Karen. I said I’ll call Karen ...
Stop shouting at me ...
Ed, for Christ’s sake ...
I’m just not able to ... Ed? Ed?’

She held the phone away
from her ear and scowled
like it had bitten her.
'The cops are charging him with murder,' she said.

I was seven.
I didn't know what that meant.
Did he owe someone money?
We hadn't any cash to pay the electricity bill.
My sneakers were so small
they made the tips of my toes white.
'Can I call him back?' I asked.
The tangerine was still in my hand.
I wanted to throw it in Mom's face and hurt her.

'No,' she said.
'And don't expect to speak to him for a long time.'

I didn't believe her.
I thought Ed would call.
I thought he'd come home.

But he never did.

SLUM LANDLORD

Aunt Karen told me not to come here.
She said Ed didn't deserve an entourage
after the pain he'd caused our family.

Even after ten long years
she blames him for everything.

She points to Ed and says,
'See what he did to us.'

And maybe she's right.
Everything turned to shit
when Ed got put away;
nothing worked any more.

So maybe this *is* a stupid idea.

I'm already pining for home, Staten Island,
anything that isn't Wakeling, Texas,
in the broiling heat.

It's not as if I *want* to be here,
checking out some slummy apartment.
But I can't afford to keep staying at
the Wakeling Motorstop Motel,
not for the whole time I'm in Texas anyway.

‘Six hundred for the month,’ the landlord croaks,
coughing up something wet and
spitting it into a Kleenex.

Judging by the dishes in the sink,
the apartment hasn’t been lived in for months and
he’d be lucky to get a dime for this hole –
roaches in the closets,
rodents in the kitchen.

‘I need it until mid-August.
I’ll give you four hundred,’ I say.

He snorts. ‘Five hundred. Cash.’
And I can tell by the way he’s
backing out of the apartment
that it’s as low as he’ll go.

Well, I guess he’s the one with the keys;
he can afford to play hardball.
‘If I find out you been selling weed,
I’ll send my men round.
You don’t wanna meet my men.’

But his men don't bother me.
I got bigger worries
 than getting bashed in with a baseball bat
by his hired goons.

I got Ed to worry about.
 Ed.

So here I am.
 Stuck.

And it's going to be the worst time of my life.
The worst time of everyone's lives.

For those who get to live.

TEXTS

In the parking lot of my motel
a gang of bikers are slugging booze from paper bags,
hellfire rock music filling up the lot.

As I pass them, my cell phone pings in my
back pocket.

I don't bother checking the message.

I know it's Angela pestering me:

Where r u?

Did u go 2 the prison?

U seen Ed??

Hows Ed???

Karens still srsly pissed off.

Eds new lawyer emailed. He seems smart.

Where R U???

I have to call my sister.

And I will.

Later.

Right now, I'm starving.

And I have to get away from this music.

BOB'S DINER

The diner is all beat up outside,
paint crumbling, half the neon sign unlit,
and inside it's the same:

broken floor tiles,
posters pale and torn.

A middle-aged waitress in a
pink bowling shirt smiles.

Her name – *Sue* – is embroidered into
her front pocket,
the black thread unravelling itself,
 snaking down the shirt like a
 little vine.

'You OK, hun?' she asks,
raising her hand to her mouth,
dragging on a cigarette right there
behind the counter
like it's totally normal –
 a waitress smoking in a restaurant.
And it might be. Around here.

I pull out my remaining cash and wave it at her.
'What would four bucks buy me?' I say.

'I guess you could get a bacon roll
and a coffee.

Would that work, hun?'

'Great,' I say, inhaling the
tail of her cigarette smoke.

She shouts my order through a swing door,
turns back to slosh coffee into a stained mug
and pushes it across the counter.

It's thick and bitter, nothing like you get in
New York,
but I don't complain.

I tear open a Splenda,
tip it in to disguise the taste.

'Any jobs going?' I ask.

'Wait there, hun.'
Sue vanishes
through the
swing doors.

I grab a muffin in plastic wrap from a basket
on the counter, stuff it into my bag before
a man appears,

a thick moustache hiding his mouth,
a belly that bulges over his waistband.

He reaches across the counter, shakes my hand.
'I'm Bob. I believe you're lookin' for work.'
His accent is drawn out and totally Texan.

'Joe Moon,' I say.

He nods.
'I need a delivery guy.
Someone with a car, cos the junker
out back won't run.
Or someone real fast on a bike.
The fast person would also need a bike.'

'I fix cars,' I say quickly.
'If I get it to go, could I have the job?'

Sue has reappeared, a fresh cigarette limp
between her twiggy fingers.
She spits bits of tobacco on to the floor.
'Just so's you know, hun, my boyfriend Lenny's
good with motors. Even he couldn't get that
crap heap to turn over.'

She uses a sour rag
to wipe coffee stains from the countertop.

'I could try,' I say,
not wanting to sound too desperate.

'OK. You can *try*,' Bob says.
He reaches into the basket and
hands me a blueberry muffin.
'Dessert's on me, son,' he says.

NO SHORE

All last week
Reed tried to cheer me up.
Sitting in his car drinking warm beer,
he tried to make me believe Ed would get off,
that I'd be back in Arlington before
the track and field holiday programme
began.
'I'll win bronze for steeple chase,
you'll get a gold for five thousand metres.
Then we'll go to the shore
and show off our medals.
We can stay at my cousin's beach house
as long as we want.
We'll get tans,
 smoke dope,
 hit on hot girls.
So many hot girls at the shore.'

'Sounds good,' I said,
knowing it was never gonna happen,
knowing I'd miss out on my entire
summer,
including the New York City
track and field programme.

It was the one thing that had kept me going
in school –

knowing that at the end of the year,
no matter how low my grades were,
I'd have the programme to prove
I wasn't some layabout loser.

But instead of running,
I was coming to Texas
to count down the days until
my brother's execution;
trying to make me feel better about that
was pointless.

THE SECOND CALL

I liked cheese sandwiches with a truckload of ketchup
and had a plate of them in my lap.

I was watching *Spiderman* on TV,
cross-legged on the carpet
wearing scuffed-up sneakers –
laces undone, feet sticky inside them.

I was eight by then,
a year after that first call which had turned
everything
inside out.

Mom shouted at me, as she always did.
‘Turn the goddamn TV down!’

She had her cell to her ear,
was squinting like she was trying to see
whatever it was she was being told.

And then,
like a rock into a river,
she fell
and began to howl.

It wasn't like you see in movies,
someone collapsing but so beautiful
and
tragic.

She was a person possessed,
smashing into pieces,
and I was afraid to get too close.
'No!' she screamed.

I knew right away the words she was hearing.
Anyone could have guessed.

We were kind of expecting it.

And not expecting it at all.

Aunt Karen had been at some of the short trial,
came home and
told us things weren't going Ed's way –
for starters, there was his confession
the day after he got arrested.
She said that if she'd been on the jury,
she'd have locked him up and
thrown away the key herself.

'He didn't do it,' Angela told her.

'I don't know any more,' Aunt Karen said.
'He looked pretty guilty to me.'

And the day that second call came,
I was the only other person at home,
alone again with Mom in the house
and
I didn't know what to do.
I mean,
Mom was always freaking out, but not like that:
 an animal caught in wire.

I went to her,
 tried to get her to stand,
 but
 she wouldn't.
She couldn't.

Mom stayed
down for a
really
long
time.

AUNT KAREN

Three hours after the bad news
our Aunt Karen came to stay.
'I'm all you've got,' she told us.

She stared at the ketchup stains on my white T-shirt,
like that was proof our family
couldn't take care of itself.
I wiped my nose with the back of my hand
and she flinched.

'We don't have space,' Angela explained.

Aunt Karen scratched her nose with her
thumbnail.

'I'll take your room. You can share with Joe
for a while.

Ed's old bed is still in there.'

Angela stood up as tall as she could.

'I need my privacy,' she said.

'Yeah, well,' Mom mumbled, cradling a gin.

‘But I have exams,’ Angela tried again.

‘I know you do,’ Aunt Karen said.

‘And you’ll pass them. I won’t have you go down the same road as Ed.’

It didn’t matter how hard we stamped our feet,
Aunt Karen had made up her mind
and Mom was in no state to argue:
Aunt Karen was staying and
we would start going to church,
not just on Sundays but after school too.
TV was

 out
and Bible study was
 in.

Karen knew how to save our souls
from falling into the darkness
that had carried off our brother,
and the first part of her plan was
 to never mention Ed again.

HOW MOM HANDLED IT

Mom stopped going out.

She littered the house with empty pill bottles.

She watched infomercials,

shopped through the TV,

said she was waiting until people forgot,

that she'd get her act together and

go back to work

once the worst blew over.

But

she never returned to work and

when she finally ventured out,

she didn't come back.

AUTO SHOP

When I told Reed's uncle at the auto shop last week that I was headed to Texas for the whole summer, he didn't take it well either.

'I don't know if I can keep your job open, Joe,' he said.

'I got guys queuing up to apprentice here and you're taking off?'

I hadn't explained to anyone apart from Reed the real reason I'd be gone.

I was ashamed and Reed must have guessed it.

'Give him a break, Uncle Sammy.

Joe's got some girl knocked up
and needs to get out of Arlington
before her brothers do him in,' Reed said.

Sammy rubbed his greasy hands against his blue overalls and frowned.

'You're lyin.'

'He's lyin',' I said.

'But I gotta go.
I'll be back though.'

Sammy sighed. 'OK. OK.
You're a hell of a lot better than
Reed at getting dirty under a hood
anyway,
I'll give you that.'

Reed grunted and reached for a wrench.
'I prefer to get dirty in other ways.'

Sammy watched me.
'You're still standing there, Joe.
What do you want?'

I didn't like to ask.
It felt like begging.
'I'm owed two weekends.'

Reed snickered.

Sammy rolled his eyes, reached into
his pocket and pulled out a roll
of twenties.
'How much?' he asked.

TEAM WRONG

Back at the motel, I call Angela.
Her voice is high pitched and
something is buzzing in the background.
'I can't hear you, Ange!' I shout.

The buzzing stops.

'I'm at the bar making mojitos,' she says. 'You OK?'

I want to tell the truth, say,
No, I'm not OK.
It's hot.
I haven't any more money for food.
I'm solo doing this,
which isn't how it should be.
I'm seventeen years old, for Christ's sake.
Why aren't you here?
Why isn't Aunt Karen? Mom?

'I found an apartment,' I say,
leaving out the bit about the bugs.
'Will the cash have cleared in my account yet?'

She coughs into the phone.

'Should have,' she says.

'But then that's it.

The boss won't give me an advance
so it'll be next month before I've got
cash to come down there.'

'Aunt Karen?' I ask hopefully.

'No way. She's still super pissed.

She picked up more stuff,
said she isn't moving back in.

I don't even know how we'll make the rent
unless she changes her mind.

And how the hell are you gonna eat?'

'I'm looking for work.'

'I wish I could get more cash, Joe.'

I half-laugh.

How exactly?

Ask strangers for handouts?

We could never get away with that –
begging for loans to be with our brother.

See, we aren't the people anyone pities.
No one cares whether or not we get to be with
Ed at the end,
how poor or hungry we are.
The cop's widow though?
If she set up a crowd-funding account
to buy a black dress and matching hat,
you'd have people donating
big time.

The widow of a murdered guy?

Do you take Mastercard?

But we aren't her – we're not the victims here.

Instead we're on the other side of right –
players for Team Wrong.

'Have you seen Ed?' Angela whispers.

I go to the bathroom,
run cold water into the shower.
'No,' I admit.

I haven't even tried.

CHICKEN SHIT

Ed wrote to me last month
asking for help.

I'm the one he thought he could rely on.

He probably imagined his baby brother
had grown into a
man.

But I'm too chicken shit
to even call the prison
and enquire about visits,
let alone
drag my sorry ass
up to the gates
and try to get in.

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