

Low Light. Episode 3. Fox Abroad.

The big road clenches its kerbs as the number 48 rattles on towards Lightwood. The pub windows scowl at the judder and a dribble of condensation is shaken towards its demise. A sharp breeze tickles the glass and elicits the top notes of a burst of laughter. Not from our lot - although there will be some hysterics from them later when enough flavoured gin has been consumed and people have run out of frown. At the moment, the neighbour contingent are sat quietly. Some are sat on their hands, some are nursing their glasses, some can't stop scrolling.

Louis has his head in his hands and his elbows on the table. Brandon gazes at the back of him, wheezing slightly and trying desperately to think of something to say to this lovely man. He lets his eyes rest on Louis' cheek and press down on it, imagining its softness. Louis who is usually a strong person. Tall, hard, rock-hard, kind. Brandon considers the contrast with himself. He's a doer - a doer of good things - but he tends towards panic when trouble strikes. Not that there's a reason to consider the contrast, he supposes with resignation.

Tanya is the hand-sitter. She's not slumped, no, never slumped. She's straight-backed and chin-upped. Her mouth is however, drawn down and the glorious eyes hooded. Those ears are a-twitch though and the tendons in the elegant neck belie a concern for something...yes, something, mmm,...never mind - she shakes herself like a Labrador retriever.

"Oh! Come on everyone, despair won't bring her back"

"Padma" snaps Louis - he says it gently but his timing is impeccable, you can see why he's done so well for himself, professionally

"What? - oh yes, of course. Sorry Louis, Padma. Our Padma"

There's a noise, a kind of disguised 'tut' - Tanya takes it graciously

'I'm just saying - we should celebrate her life shouldn't we?

Oh, Brandon looks like he's about to pipe up but then Louis expands his chest a little.

'Of course. Yes we should. And we will Tanya but not now. Its been what," he yanks his watch round to look at it with, it has to be said, a smidge of theatricality, "two hours? Since she was *murdered?*'

Silence. The whole place is silent not just their table.

'Louis' tries Brandon softly

'Sorry' cuts Tanya

Mick gets up, ever chivalrous (or is it an attempt to claim the spotlight? Not that I'm cynical or anything...)

"No, come on - look lets just - here's to Padma. Our friend and neighbour. Rest in Peace." And he raises his glass. Well-judged actually.

There are many glasses raised. The pub twinkles as pint pots and shot glasses, stemware and highballs are held aloft and catch the candlelight. There's a sigh from the tarmac outside as everything seems to stop for a moment. No traffic, no footfalls, animals waiting, birds perched, bats blinking. The fox looks up then steps on, soundlessly, back into the heart of the neighbourhood.

Gavin stares up at the lantern atop Lightwood House. He's not sure why he's staring. Something is magnetising his eyes up there. Is there an odd glow or something? Perhaps he just hasn't really looked at it before. It's an odd structure. All the glass is intact in its eight panes whereas every other window in the house it seems is either boarded up, cracked or taped over. It glimmers. That's it, that's the word, it glimmers in the low light. Greenly, glimmering. Isn't that from *Howards End*? From the book that Leonard Bast reads, the one that inspires his walk out of London? Something did something 'glimmeringly' - Gavin is pleased with the memory, barely constructed though it is.

Someone is watching him, he lowers his head tensely. It's a fox. Cocky. Two meters away is all. Head low, fixing him with his foxiness. Could be a her. Gavin doesn't know, feels suddenly worried, he's heard stories of foxes mauling feet while people sleep. This one looks well-fed though. Beautiful coat.

A crash-wrench as the front door opens and when he looks back, Fox is only a shudder in the undergrowth.

Gavin hides. Why? He doesn't know, neither do we. He hides, like a guilty school-boy. Its only 'good-nights' and 'let us know if you hear anything' type chat from the police is all. That inspector guy and his sidekick. Something off about that inspector. The sidekick rotates almost imperceptibly and Gavin feels as if he's standing naked in Tesco. How did she see him?! Has she seen him? He's so tense his eyeballs have hardened. Loosens his grip on the brandy bottle incase he smashes it. Thinks how ridiculous that idea is and almost splutter-chuckles. Oh god now he's got the hysterics. Hold it! Hold it!

They drive away. He breathes out.

'Are you coming in Gavin?' ventures Shirley

Gavin feels foolish but takes himself up the path and through the old doorway apologetically.

'Don't close the door' calls Kat as she approaches along Alder. Gavin and Shirley stop. Shirley's face is drawn down and the frown is back. Gavin is in the middle, as ever. An awkward moment and yes, in they all go.

In to lay the foundation for a different future with only Eric. No Padma.

Gavin holds the door as Kat slinks though and as the girls trot up stairs ahead of him, he is left in the musty entrance hall. He stops, hackles up. He wonders when he acquired hackles? And why? Scuttling - ah, mice, that's why.

"Meooowww"

"Agh!! Ah - Deidre, its OK - its OK! Only Dierdre. Jesus.'

"Gavin and me can deal with Eric there's no need"

"Deal with him?"

"Oh don't start, Kat"

"I'm not starting - god...Shirl?"

They stop, up above Gavin, who has resumed his staring upwards pose.

"you know what this means, don't you."

"I'm not-"

"You know, you do know."

"No Kat. Come on, not tonight, I have to look after Eric, make sure he's OK, get him to sleep and then-"

"Yes. Of course. But I want to stay here and be able to talk to him when I can"

"But we can't ask him"

"We can. I can anyway. What else can I do?"

"Send Henry away apparently"

"Hey, fuck you"

Gavin legs it up the stairs two at a time

"Ladies"

Shirley and Kat both look at him from on high.

"Er - sorry, I was only-"

"Yes well don't OK?" Shirley says. Kat's mouth twitches. Shirley catches that but she breathes instead of snaps and -

"Come on let's go up, he shouldn't be on his own"

"Where's..."

"Gone" says Shirley with some finality. Kat and Gavin share a look.

Where's Reg? The thing is, Reg has been trying to get back in through the cat flap but has been thwarted. First by Dierdre's gleefully spitting presence just inside the little door and then by his own girth - confusing, he didn't realise he'd put on that much weight. So, he was on his way round to the front when Fox confronted him in her (she is a her) flight from Gavin. There has, shall we say, been something of a stand-off. There has been growling.

Eric raises his chin slightly as the three adults enter his room.

"There's a standoff in the garden" he says

"Oh, Reg," sighs Shirley, "I'll get him in a minute, let's get you settled Eric, are you OK in here or do you want to sleep?"

"I'm alright here" he says as he stands like a spare part next to the window.

The others settle at various points, leaning, sitting. There are cushions, not been sat on for a while, scattered, tucked under tables and in boxes. They arrange themselves as Gavin finds glasses and pours them drinks.

"Padma" says Shirley, raising her glass. They follow her salute, sadly. Into the silence that follows Kat says: "Will you tell us about her Eric? Tell us a story about you and Padma"

"What?" He looks round sharply, alarmed. "No, lass"

“Go on Eric” says Gavin, suddenly 10 years old again

“Gavin if he doesn’t want to...”

“No, go on Eric, please. Its good to reminisce when someone dies”

“Oh it is is it? Mm. You know its not always good to reminisce it can be the exact opposite of good, it can take hold of people and poison their minds to much reminiscing” he’s getting agitated

“Yes, no it - that’s right Eric of course but Kat means just when someone you love dies, it can help to heal - no I mean” Shirley stumbles about in the land of well-meaning platitudes

“You mean we should honour her”

“Yes” says Kat

“Yes” echoes Shirley

“It would honour her. She was a lovely person.” says Gavin

“We should honour her. I should honour her. Of course I should.”

“She would have wanted you to share stories with others, wouldn’t she Eric?” asks Kat

He looks through the windows into the dark. His eyes travel down to the dark track. He pales.

“Its not as simple as that” he says

“W-why not?” ventures Gavin

Eric sighs. “Where’s Dierdre. I want Dierdre?”

“I’ll go and look for her if that’ll help” offers Gavin

“No I don’t mean - oh. No you don’t understand. If I start telling then there may be consequences. I don’t know if you’ve noticed but there haven’t been any stories from me for the last few years well there’s a reason for that. Its not safe. Its just not safe-“

“Eric its only talking about nice things you and Padma did together. Tell us about her - it’ll help. It will” pleads Kat

“It doesn’t matter about me Kat. Vishwa was taken and so I must honour her. You’re all right about that. I must walk the track again. Its just - what we’ll find if we do. There are places that I’ve never dared go and without her there, I might stumble on them. I’m old, my words get mixed up, if I say the wrong thing then...”

“We’re here Eric. Can we help you?”

“Yes, Eric, we can make sure you don’t go off-piste!” quips Gavin. He gets given a look and pipes down. Eric however seems to take this seriously.

“Can you? I doubt it - no offence.”

He drains his glass and holds it out to Gavin..

“Will you go down to the cellar Gavin? And get me a bottle of the green from the first room in there instead? If I’m going to start telling you all about Vishwa, I’ll need some proper fortification.”

Gavin stands up as if he’s been given a heroic task.

“Yes, yes of course Eric,” then realises what that might mean... “where - I don’t think I’ve been down...”

“Its the door under the outside steps. You know the ones that step down from the terrace to the pond”

“Is it?”

“Yes”

“The scary looking door” he mumbles

“Just go and get it Gavin”

“Please Gavin if you wouldn’t mind, there’s a light and there’s no one in there at the moment”

Gavin's eyes take on a wild look

"No one's in there? What do you mean?"

"Gavin!" hisses Shirley.

'O-OK" he whispers. "If I'm not back-"

Shirley gives him a seething look and he twists around, wrenching his neck. Kat sniggers.

Down we go with Gavin then, neck sore and feeling sorry for himself. He hangs onto the rail, nervous of the worn carpet and broken stair treads all the way down, spiralling down to the ground floor and through the kitchen, glints of things catching his eye, out the back door where Dierdre is sitting guard and round the side on what was gravel to the back terrace and the grand steps. He stops at the sadness of the neglect and the disintegration. He envisions Edwardian ladies with the parasols adorning the scene. Then he lands his gaze on the door. The terrifying door. It stands smirking at him, its padlock large and old fashioned. He can see its not actually locked though. Unfortunately.

A click of his neck - actually a stretch to the floor - that helps. A bit of a jog on the spot, yeah, that's better! OK! Right then. OK.

He pushes. Its pitch black, coal black.

"Go back" he whispers to himself "No, Gav, come on its only a room".

He edges forward looking for the light switch.

"Old duffer, there's no switch - oh, hang on, its a pull thing"" He sees it glint. He gives a tug and there's a satisfying clunk as it illuminates a cavernous space.

"Bloody hell!"

No subtlety here, everything is illuminated. And, its clean. Strangely devoid of dust.

There are benches - like kitchen worktops with cupboards and shelves beneath running the length of the place, boxes at the far end, wooden ones, stacked high. A concrete floor, not degraded, smooth. There are wire-covered wall lights. Old fashioned but no cobwebs. Tools on one of those boards with the outlines drawn on. There's a chisel missing, Gavin notes.

He's shocked at all this. Then he sees an archway to the left, allowing entrance to a further room under the house itself. Gavin recovers himself.

"OK, what did Eric say, the first room? Yes"

Green bottle. He looks. Can't see it. Doesn't believe there is any, lets his eyes roam carefully 180° and sees - what? Not a bottle not 'one' bottle. He realises there are many bottles racked. Wine then? He reaches for one. Grabs it and is again surprised. This object in this clean room is covered in dust. Caked. It clings to his hand. He brushes it off on his jeans.

He looks at it, peers in through the glass.

“Whoa!”

He sees a movement in there, loses his grip on it, grasps it, seems to be dropping it, offers the falling bottle a mid-air hug and miraculously, landing on his backside with his knees round his ears secures it within his flailing cuddle and feels its warmth.

“What the?”

Its warm.

“Oh god, OK right”

Gavin gets up holding the bottle a firm grip but far away from himself and marches out of the room towards the door when

“Reg - agh!”

Reg wags with amusement. Fox forgotten in the face of Gavin-shenanigans which are always fun to watch and very pleasing to initiate.

“Reg. Hi. I’m glad you’re here actually. You’re on my to-do list.” He holds the bottle out. “What d’you make of this eh?”

Reg sits. Considers. Whines.

“My thoughts exactly. OK, come on” And he clunks the light, frowns at another scuttling sound and closes the door. Sees the flash of Fox again as he hurries back inside letting Deirdre in too. Door locked, Reg, Dierdre, Gavin and the bottle of fearsome liquid all safe.

Inside the Golden Hammer pub, Louis stands

“I should get back to Sarah, I’ll call the police in the morning and find out what we can do.”

Brandon looks up, impressed. The husband watches Brandon, carefully but recovers his manners and offers a supportive smile.

Tanya watches him leave and once he’s gone, the group breathes out a little and Tanya sits up straighter. Mick pulls his stool closer.

“So who do we think did it?”

“Mick-“ Tanya says with a mock reprimand in her voice

“Well according to Sally it was that girl of Eric’s”

“I don’t think so” says Tanya. “Sally’s projecting”

“Well she was there at the time”

“She may well have been but that doesn’t mean she stabbed Padma!” Bit loud that.

Mick shuffles forward a little further

“Apparently the ugly sisters were witnesses too”

“Ugly - Mick!” she slaps his knee. Brandon winces.

“Sorry - am I being too factual? Apologies all. No but they were there, in the street - just happened to be outside on a freezing cold Sunday night, having a chat! When did Kat get back anyway - five minutes previously? Seems odd to me.”

“Well they are odd but really it doesn’t mean a thing. The most likely explanation is a burglary gone wrong”

“No its not” says Brandon. There’s a bit of a sheen on his pink face. Warm in the Hammer.

“Oh?”

“Most murders are committed by those known to the murdered. So to say”

Tanya considers the put down.

“You’re not the most eloquent of activists are you Brandon”

Tanya’s phone lights up. She tips her eyeball down and yes its Lance, of course its Lance. She groans inwardly. Meanwhile, Brandon is mid-defence

“...quite eloquent enough thank you Tanya I wasn’t aware it was a competition - do you know other ‘activists’ that are more eloquent than me? Is there a league table? And what has me being..”

“I need to take this, sorry” she says and leaves.

Brandon is thus silenced however Mick is nodding his trademark nod.

“Its true, they do say that. ‘specially women.”

“Mmmm” mmm’s Brandon.

“Well. whoever it was will have blood all over them. Did you see Padma. Did you see the front step?”

“Well the police will catch them with so much DNA flying about.”

“You’d think so wouldn’t you”

“Yeah. Oh god, poor Padma. Poor Louis, he’ll miss her. And poor Eric, bloody hell, this might be the end of him!”

“Do you think?”

“Well he’s not in the best of health is he? I mean they were like a married couple. Or siblings, perhaps. Anyway.”

“Yeah.

There’s an awkward pause and Mick ponders on Tanya’s silhouette outside the window. Lovely looking woman Tanya. She seems a tad agitated, not that he can see easily from in the pub but there’s something angry about her demeanour as she appears to propel each word into her phone like she’s hitting nails with a hammer.

“Where’s Charity, Lance? I’m not interested in Sally’s theories, she’s a nosey woman with the memory of a goldfish. Have you ever met the girl? She doesn’t have it in her. Yes Lance, actually I think that Charity does have it in her. I think Charity is very much the kind of human who could act swiftly and decisively in a difficult situation and if what I think has gone down has bloody well gone down, that is precisely what has arisen here. I told you to keep them out of it. No. Lance. I have no choice. This is on you. Bring Charity to me by midday tomorrow. And find that bag.

Tanya breathes in and presses ‘end call’ on the out breath. The street seems to shrink back apologetically when she looks about her. Could it be that everything dims slightly? The sounds of the traffic are more muffled. Let’s have a look, ah yes, there’s cloud cover enough now and it looks like...snow, yes a few fat flakes begin to fall on Tanya’s wrinkled nose - oh no, she’s gone. Ah there she is again, coat on, arms crossed, on the march home.

Eric takes the bottle from Gavin with a beady eye on him.

“Did you shake this?” He asks, suspiciously

“No!” says Gavin. Guilt drips from the word and everyone looks at him with disappointment. “No! I didn’t - I nearly dropped it, I though I saw something and it startled me”

“What?” says Shirley

“Well”

“What do you mean?” says Eric

“No, nothing, it was just the light I think, don’t worry. I’m just a bit on edge is all - what with - you know. Sorry”

Eric eyes him and uncorks the bottle. Glimmering. Again, the word putters about in Gavin’s brain. As Eric handles the bottle, Gavin thinks it suddenly beautiful. The colour. The colour is emerald and there are speckles of lively gold in the glass - no, not in the glass of the bottle, in the liquid that Eric pours. It slips languidly out and seems to curl around the inside of the tumblers coating the glass like toffee sauce. It clings and then relinquishes its grip to settle, contentedly, awaiting its next journey.

They’re silent. They take their glasses. There’s a pungent aroma.

“This is...” murmurs Kat

“I know” says Shirley quietly

“What?” croaks Gavin. “What is it?”

“Shh” says Shirley

“Shirl”

“Its fine”

“is it?”

“Drink to Padma and honour her life with me now” says Eric.

They stop the bickering and although Gavin has his mouth open ready to speak again, the girls nod and give him the eye so that he can only shrug. There’s another glittering in the pause before the toast is drunk but where the pub managed chinks of light, Eric’s lantern room is made for this and the place is filled with stars that seem to extend out into the dark.

It’s the snowflakes of course.

Eric drinks and wipes his mouth and sits down in his chair. He points behind the window at the snow with his swollen-jointed finger. The others have all sipped and grimaced although Gavin is pleasantly surprised. Shirley stops him from drinking more with a knowing look.

“There she is. All asunder. She’s coming back to say goodbye properly. Dear Padma, my dear Vishwa. You’re reminding me of the dance in the valley. Cor, we were young then. We danced though the woods and on the open moor, down by the stream and in the little clearings. Simple pleasure.

“There wasn’t complication like now! Too much choice there is now, too much complexity for no good reason. Oh if I could go back everything would be better...”

“Tell us about that day Eric, tell us about Padma”

“Dear Vishwa, dear Padma. Alright let’s go back together. Remember the dance? Remember the little van that sped by? It was like a cartoon wasn’t it! Hahaaa! Remember the flowers in the morning? We’d danced all night, it was summer. So warm but we got cold just before dawn so we walked up the hillside to catch the sun as soon as we could. As we sat waiting, the sun seemed to race across the land to us and warmed us and the flowers in the grass. Orchids and colts foot. Clover and birds foot trefoil. The fragrance took over us and - you know I’m still not sure what happened for the next few minutes. We were bathed in it. Transformed. Transformed into ourselves. Later that day I told the story of our dance and how we were changed and that was the first time it happened...”

Eric’s away in his memory and his energy wanes then. He sags. His face crumples and his guests watch as he seems to fall to sleep. The listeners wait. The room has darkened but there’s still a glimmering glow from - where? The snow - still flailing about outside perhaps. They become aware of a delicious fragrance - they can picture the hillside in Eric’s story as vividly as if they were there. They breathe the scent in deeply and it soothes them.

Kat sees them first. Little purple ones, pink ones, ones with spots. The yellow of the birds foot, the pompoms of clover, waving about at them from every corner and crevice every shelf and chair and cushion. Real, delicate wild-flowers. Glowing with the sunrise, warming the room with their very memory.

They all see them, they brush them with their fingers.

Then Eric lets out a sigh and sets to a light snore. The flowers wither and the room grows colder and the light increases until it is almost too severe and then settles again as if someone has dimmed it ready for sleeping.

In the newly restored low light then, Dierdre jumps triumphantly onto Eric's lap, Reg settles down in resignation, the sisters huddle together and Gavin eases his leg for cramp. In the morning, they'll ask questions. Now they just listen to the cry of the fox as she picks up a new scent on the old dark track.

Written by Melanie Crawley
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