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The Alibi

by Ali Giles

My mother has one of the council flats behind the decent houses in King's Drive. How that must have hurt, when the council threw these miserable piles of crap up right at the end of their gardens.

In the mornings the yummy mummies corral their young into their big six-seaters for school. I lie there thinking of nothing much, smoking a cigarette to mask the smell of apples and listening to the polite whoosh and bump of the side doors on the six-seaters.

'My room'. Freshly decorated, especially for me; a cold, watery blue and a set of paint-speckled Agatha Christie books yellowing on the windowsill. Carol gave them to her for Christmas two years ago, and my mother has never even broken the seal.

"I got these on DVD," she'd said, "but thanks."

I had a life once, like the people in King's Drive.

If my mother had kept her mouth shut then I wouldn't be here. The curious anticipation on her face when she told me what she'd seen, eyes as watery blue as the walls in the spare room. She never liked Carol – how many ways she found to show it. The way she clung to it, refused to let anything past it.

I suppose that while you can fall out of love, you can't fall out of hate.

We could have worked it out, me and Carol, if only she'd listened to me. Why keep answering the phone if you're just going to keep hanging up? She knew what she was doing, she kept pushing and pushing, she knew I'd blow up.

'No innocent person ever has an alibi'.

That's what I'm thinking this morning as I lie and smoke. I think it was something I heard on the telly last night.

I get up when I smell toast. Nice, thick, decent bread browning under the grill, just how she knows I like it; but underneath, that sharp apple smell. A half-full washing basket sits by the front door. She takes the washing down in two trips; she can't manage the whole basketful.

When I hear her wheezing back up the stairs, I snib the catch on the front door so she can't get in, and let the toast burn.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke in the flat."

"I wish you wouldn't use that apple cleaner spray shit. It gets in my food – why can't you get some decent stuff?" I surprise myself at how aggressive I sound. "There's no sugar," I say then, looking away.

"There's all those sachets you keep stealing from MacDonalds in the drawer."

"They're wet."

"I'll pick some up," she says, "and some of that Mr Muscle."

'No innocent person ever has an alibi'. That's really sticking in my head.

My mum cried at my wedding, but she hadn't said much when I told her what I'd done.

"But you were here," she'd said quietly, "all evening."