

Txt

by M T Mathieson

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To my children for their infuriating inspiration.

Carol Walsh stepped off the bus onto the dimly lit street. She hated this part of an evening out, especially when her husband was away. If Rob were home she could send him a text message from the bus to ask him to meet her at the bus stop. Tonight though, Rob was working in Colchester and wouldn't be home until the following evening. These staff social evenings always seem to be at the worst possible times. She wished she'd just thought of a good excuse not to go, one that didn't make her sound like a wimp.

She walked along the tree lined street, her heartbeat pounding in her head, trying to keep as close to the streetlights as she could and resenting the rumble of the bus as it pulled away, preventing her from listening out for footsteps behind her or unnatural rustling from the gardens she passed. As she rounded the corner into the street where she lived, the tension in her jaw relaxed a little and her breathing became less shallow. She could see the glow of the porch light she always left on if she was going to be late home, a bit of extra light to minimize those shadows at the side of the house where the garage didn't quite meet the exterior wall. Turning into her own small front garden, eager for the safety of her home, she was startled by a sound behind her. Slowly, she turned, afraid of what she would see. Her lungs drew an involuntary gasp of breath as she felt something move close to her. Whatever it was, it was very near, although, strangely, almost at ground level. Panic and confusion wrestled for control of her senses and she had to force herself to look down. The breath she'd taken expelled itself as a whisper of laughter when she saw Max, next door's cat, searching among the potted plants for whatever potential snack he could find. Turning around again, she put the key in the lock, feeling slightly foolish. Sophie is probably right; she does panic over nothing.

At the thought of her daughter, Carol's relief gave way to annoyance. Sophie had promised she wouldn't be late home but there were no other lights on in the house so either Sophie was in bed – unlikely, or she wasn't back yet.

Carol dropped her bag on the hall table and took off her shoes, rubbing her feet before stepping down to the carpet and feeling the strain on her calves as her legs adjusted to the flat. Another good argument against going out: high heels. She walked quietly up the stairs, enjoying the feel of the soft carpet against her sore feet, and pushed Sophie's door open. The bed was empty. What had she expected?

"Sophie?" she called out, just to be sure.

No answer.

She tilted her head towards the ceiling and closed her eyes. It looked like she wasn't going to be able to go straight to bed as she'd hoped. Carol walked back down the stairs. She felt around in her bag for her phone and took it into the kitchen to call Sophie while she made a cup of tea.

Again, no answer.

Her jaw tightened again and she felt the pressure of her back teeth pressing hard against each other. She would have to communicate with her daughter by text message, as usual. Why do teenagers have to do everything by text? Why can't they simply speak to people?

Sophie I'm home

Sent: 2 Jul 23:03

Sender: Mum

Carol cleared away the breakfast dishes while she waited for the kettle to boil.

Still no response from Sophie.

**U said u'd b home b4
me**

Sent: 2 Jul 23:07

Sender: Mum

She picked up her tea in one hand and her phone in the other and took them into the living room to wait for a reply. Sitting down, she turned on the t.v. and switched to the news channel. She'd need something to keep her awake.

How long will u b?

Sent: 2 Jul 23:14

Sender: Mum

In an attempt to suppress her irritation, she tried to focus on the news. Another gang related shooting in London. The World is getting worse. So many dangers growing up these days.

Her thoughts returned to her own daughter.

I've tried phoning.

Answer me

Sent: 2 Jul 23:23

Sender: Mum

Carol turned the phone over rhythmically in her hand, as if the action would somehow cause the phone to ring. Her eyes still registered the flickering images on the screen and her ears heard the sounds that accompanied them but she couldn't really comprehend any meaning from them.

She tried the phone again. Why doesn't she answer?

Sophie where r u?

Sent: 2 Jul 23:26

Sender: Mum

A host of possibilities flashed through her mind. Maybe she had forgotten to charge her phone. No, the phone rang when she called it; it would go straight to voicemail if it was switched off. Maybe she'd lost it. She would have used a friend's phone to call and let her know, surely? What if she'd had an accident? She could be in hospital, or worse. No, she couldn't think about the worse. Would the hospital staff answer the phone or would they just let it ring?

R u still with amber?

Sent: 2 Jul 23:29

Sender: Mum

No matter how hard she fought against hysteria, she was unable to stop dread from permeating through her until it became a physical presence. The tea she had drunk was threatening to regurgitate as a sickly, acid feeling started to rise in her throat.