

Rhea woke up with a start. It was dark. The silence was only broken by the sound of her own breathing.

She couldn't move. She tried, but her body just didn't want to respond. She wasn't in pain, yet somewhere in her woozy mind she was aware she should be, was aware that she was injured.

She was in a bed. Even without moving or looking, she knew it wasn't a hospital bed. If she wasn't in hospital, then where was she and how had she got here? More to the point, who had brought her here and why? She could make no sense of it, but she had to, or panic would take over.

*'Start at the beginning.'* The thought jolted through her like a defibrillator, leaving her no other option but to obey.

Just a few days ago, life had been safe, ordinary, and the only problem she'd had was trying to explain to her friend Laura why she was following up her innocent, and perfectly inoffensive, aspiration.

“You know when you walk down the same street you've always done, then you suddenly notice all this stuff that's always been there that you'd never noticed?” Rhea said, struggling to justify her latest wildlife interest to her baffled friend.

She searched Laura's face for an understanding that never came. Instead, she saw Laura Watson sitting on her bargain leather sofa (just paid off) in the tiny living room of her housing association flat (which she hoped some day to buy a share of) in front of her latest acquisition of which she was hugely proud (a large smart T.V.) and felt maybe just a little crazy for not doing the same.

“Naah, that's you all over. Notice nowt me...too busy workin and keepin this place goin for me an little Colin,” Laura said cheerily, getting up to usher Rhea out. “Anyway, I thought bird watchin was for blokes.”

Rhea laughed, now more at ease.

“It’s not just birds, its...well, a conservation club. You know? Nature study things? Anyway, Jack likes all this stuff, so it means she doesn’t think her mam is a complete dunce.”

Laura opened the door, her face as kindly as ever.

“Yeah, okay. See you at the school gates tomorrow, but save some energy for Saturday night. There’s goin to be a good crowd in, and that George likes you,” she said, giving Rhea an affectionate nudge.

Rhea just managed to grin in semblance of delight, covering both the sinking feeling she’d got at the prospect of the night, especially with the handsome, but as only she had seemed to notice, slurring George, and the surprise she'd felt at her own reaction.

As she hurried down the road towards the conservation site, wondering what was wrong with her for not finding these perfectly normal, ordinary delights appealing, she took no notice of the heaviness in the air that caused the birds to chitter nervously. She took no notice of the be-suited young men with their identical old fashioned haircuts, and the demurely dressed young women, all with their frighteningly identical shiny-eyed smiles, filing into the evening service of the building that served as their church. She took no notice of the fiery-eyed young men dressed in the tribal garb of a foreign land that they saw as their future, but which she thought of as “in the long gone prehistoric past.” She took no notice as they huddled together at the door of their meeting hall, and, like their shiny eyed counterparts, talked earnestly of a disturbingly archaic tribal version of righteousness that would put right the ills of the world. She took no notice of the news headlines flickering on the new public information screen by the shops which declared, “Climate Change a Myth?” “No to Terrorism,” and “Increase In Illness Despite wealth. New Pandemic Feared This Winter.”

She wasn't blind. She knew they were there. It was simply that she never took any notice; no one did. It was none of their business, unless they were specialists such as celebrities, politicians, journalists or police officers. These things were for the news, to be tutted at of an evening as a kind of entertainment after the realities of normal, ordinary life, such as breadwinning, shopping,

cleaning, sorting out the kids, and maybe a little lovemaking with the significant other. In short, the headlines were simply what made up the backdrop to life in the suburbs of a modern city. What she did notice with relief, was that it wasn't raining.