

The contributor

It's raining when Mrs Hudridge leaves her house. Fat drops plummet from the sky and splat onto the pavement like overripe plums. How inconvenient. She's already running a tad late. Mrs Hudridge hefts her handbag above her head and hurries to her trusty 2009 Ford Fiesta, fumbling with the cold keys. Windscreen wipers smear frantically across the glass as she veers onto the A23. The drive to work is, as usual, teeming with young idiot drivers who never indicate properly. She sighs, and jabs at the horn a few times for good measure.

At 7.56 a.m., Mrs Hudridge jerks into her car park, the familiar office block looming above her. It's a hunkering toad of a building, complete with three stories of grimy windows and cracking bricks. Mrs Hudridge hustles towards the *East Sussex Foster Care Organisation* sign that hangs limply over the entrance. Puddles jump their way into her work shoes, the moisture soaking up her stockings like butter into a crumpet. She has barely shouldered her way through the foggy door before she is cornered abruptly by Sandra the ever-present receptionist.

'Good morning, Maude!' Sandra simpers, bouncing a teetering pile of paperwork from one pillowy hip to the other. 'Miserable weather today, innit!'

Mrs Hudridge wastes no time in swatting the lady aside and making a beeline for the coffee pot. Someone has already taken her favourite mug. The nerve! She makes a mental note to track down the culprit later. Today, the coffee is lukewarm and most definitely on the weak side. What a pity. She knows all too well that a bad coffee leads only to a bad day.

After her disappointing caffeine dose, it's time for Mrs Hudridge to hasten upstairs before any more employees can bombard her with insufferable small talk. Her office chair is waiting like a faithful puppy. She wedges herself in place and adjusts the manager's plaque sitting proudly on the desk. Even after 15 years on the job, the sign never fails to lighten her mood just so. Mrs Hudridge makes a start on the day's administrative tasks. There are a few foster referral forms, some incident reports, and an email from Betty at Child Protection Services. Nothing worth wasting too much brainpower over. She is just skimming through the last week's paper when there's a persistent knocking at the office door. A frumpy outline hovers behind the frosted glass – it's Sandra again.

‘Dear me,’ huffs Mrs Hudridge, setting down her spectacles.

‘Sorry to bother you, Maude,’ Sandra flusters as she bursts open the door. ‘But oh my, look what has come up!’

A weighty foster child’s file lands on the desk with a smack. Rammed inside is the paperwork for a little girl. Her ID photo shows a halo of golden ringlets surrounding an endearing face, twinkling eyes and a shy smile.

‘Esmeralda Roberts,’ Sandra says shakily. ‘Someone from KFA just dropped off this information.’

Mrs Hudridge frowns at the file. The entries are badly written, the details vague. It looks like the manager at Kent Fostering Agency needs to rethink some staff contracts. ‘It says here...Esmeralda’s had five – no, six – different fosterers. And she’s barely eight years old! Good heavens.

‘Yes, I know. And I certainly wouldn’t recommend reading the reasons why, unless you have a very large box of tissues on your desk.’ Sandra takes a shaky breath, pulling a severely over-used example from her cardigan sleeve. ‘Oh Maude, it’s dreadful, it really is. Another tragic accident has just befallen her most recent fosterer. The poor woman passed away last night in hospital.’

Mrs Hudridge grimaces. What unfortunate and scarring events the child must have endured! And such a young, sweet-looking one at that.

‘Well, Maude...’ Sandra continues. ‘The problem is, KFA are highly oversubscribed this month. They have no vacancies and have begged us to help them out with Esmeralda.’

‘We’re not exactly swimming with available foster families either,’ Mrs Hudridge grumbles, rubbing at the headache beginning to bubble at her temple. When this has all been sorted out, someone over at Kent is going to have a piece of her mind. ‘We will have to find some sort of temporary accommodation for Esmeralda, until a carer is contacted. Go ask the other staff. Surely one of them will take her for a few nights.’

‘Of course.’ Sandra blinks rapidly and rustles out the door, honking her nose as she toddles down the corridor.

Mrs Hudridge exhales as silence once again envelops her. Reaching over to the filing cabinet, she yanks out the appropriate form to document Esmeralda’s temporary stay with a staff member. She’s always found ticking boxes to be one of life’s greatest pleasures – nothing fills her with the same immense satisfaction as indulging in an especially lavish checkmark. All too soon, there comes another flurry of impassioned knocking.

‘Come in,’ Mrs Hudridge grunts.

Sandra shoves herself into the office. ‘Look, please don’t be irritable,’ she gulps. ‘I asked everyone, but they are all... unavailable.’

Mrs Hudridge’s head snaps up. ‘What do you mean, *unavailable*? That’s ridiculous.’

There’s a pause, in which Sandra suddenly finds her brown loafers very interesting to look at.

‘Spit it out, Sandra. I don’t have all day.’

‘Sorry Maude...it’s just nobody *wants* to take Esmeralda.’

Mrs Hudridge feels anger fizzing in her arteries. She quickly pops a blood-pressure pill. The last time a child needed emergency accommodation, she had no problem finding someone to take the boy for a few nights. Who do these useless excuses for staff members think they are? She is left with only one option.

‘I’ll have to take her then.’

Happiness floods Sandra’s face faster than if she’d been told the digestives were on special at Aldi. ‘Oh, thank goodness! I’ll arrange for Kent Fostering Agency to drop her off at your place. Does 5.30 p.m. work for you?’

The rest of the day unfolds in an ordinary montage of form-filling, sudoku, and tracking down the person who stole her morning coffee mug. It doesn’t take long for the little hand on her clock to locate the 5 p.m. mark. Mrs Hudridge shuts down the outdated desktop and

dashes out the fire exit before Sandra can engulf her in farewells. She instantly regrets her hasty departure. Not even her trusty handbag can protect her tweed suit from becoming saturated in seconds. Mrs Hudridge tries desperately to relive her moments of glory on the Sixth Form athletics team as she dodges the swollen puddles. At least her car is somewhat drier.

The engine hacks to life like someone with the flu. There's been a nasty crash on the A26, and it's getting dark as she finally skids onto her street. The roofs of the terraced houses stretch towards the murderous sky like abandoned gravestones. Her house is fourth on the right.

'Home sweet home,' Mrs Hudridge grimaces, shouldering open the door. She hangs her sodden jacket and has just popped on the kettle when the doorbell rings. Two figures huddle on the doorstep, shrouded in dripping raincoats.

'Good evening.' It's the local constable. 'I've brought young Esmeralda.'

The smaller figure steps inside and lifts her hood. Mrs Hudridge recognises the girl from the ID file, but now, dark eye bags stain her face and her once-beautiful locks hang in matted tendrils. Poor dear. After what she's been through, it's no wonder the wee thing is in a bit of a state. Mrs Hudridge places a gentle hand on Esmeralda's back, leading her down the dingy corridor.

'Here's your room. You can unpack your things, and I'll come and make the bed for you right away.'

She hurries back to the constable to offer him a cup of tea, but he is already backing down the doorsteps.

'You have a good night now, ma'am.' He raises his cap, scurrying off into the gloomy haze of rain.

After re-latching the front door, Mrs Hudridge makes her way to the linen cupboard and pulls out a stack of crumpled bed sheets. She can make out clattering sounds emanating from the spare room, and she smiles to herself, glad the little girl is making herself at home.

She pushes open Esmeralda's door. 'Here we are!'

And then she screams.

The noise sounds horribly thin and choked in the tiny room. Lined up neatly on the bed are six large jars, each one containing a gruesome fleshy object suspended in yellowish water. Are they...pickled frogs? Mice? She takes a step forward. No. They're more lumpy, different sizes. Deformed tissue. Esmeralda is standing with her back to Mrs Hudridge, still beside the window.

'Child...' Mrs Hudridge whispers, voice strangled and hoarse. 'Tell me. What on earth is in those jars?'

Esmeralda revolves around slowly, fixing her eyes on Mrs Hudridge. She's struck by how lifeless they look, like the marbles in one of those awful museum taxidermies.

'I will tell you if you wish.'

The girl's voice is dark and gravelly, not at all how she imagined it. Mrs Hudridge nods numbly, clutching the linen with white hands.

'They are organs,' Esmeralda intones. 'I must have all the organs of the human body, one each from a different adult. Only then will I be able to resurrect my birth parents.'

The pile of sheets topples from Mrs Hudridge's trembling grasp. Esmeralda is clearly insane. And dangerous. She must call someone. How has this horrid child gone unnoticed? She starts to back towards the door, only to realise it has somehow shut behind her. In a flash Esmeralda is by her side. Tiny cold fingers lock around her wrist, something long twinkles in her other hand.

'I think I shall take the spleen,' Esmeralda muses in that ghastly gravelly voice. 'And this time I will tell them that you tripped over and hit your head. Another tragic accident.' She smiles, and light flickers off her delicate teeth. 'Thank you for your contribution, Maude Hudridge.'