The Call of the Wild by Josie Turner

Their neighbourly exchanges are limited to ‘Nice morning’ and ‘Nice afternoon’. Barbara doesn’t go out after 6pm, so there are no opportunities to comment on the quality of evenings in Kingsley Drive.

In summer, the setting sun glides below the roofline of the Harrisons’ house. Barbara watches from across the road, peeping between her curtains. Lights appear at the Harrisons’ windows, first downstairs and then upstairs as the children are settled into bed. A porchlight glows above their turquoise painted front door, illuminating a jumble of sandals left outside. It comforts Barbara to see these familiar things and know that the Harrisons are keeping to a schedule. Routines make her feel safe, quelling for a moment the panic that always threatens to engulf her.

She usually lets Scratchy in from the garden as soon as the Harrisons settle down, and then takes a glass of water to bed. She pulls the covers over her head, thankful to have made it through another terrifying day, alive and in one piece, while Scratchy observes her from the foot of her bed, looping one paw over his ear, performing his lordly ablutions.

Except, this evening, he does not appear at the back door while Barbara stands there with an open can of salmon-in-jelly. She calls his name, expecting to see the usual white whiskers pop out from under the rhododendron bush. Nothing.

Concerned, she takes a hesitant step onto the patio. It’s August, and the days are already shortening. She feels the world tilting and bucking, as though she’s on a boat in a storm. She grips the doorjamb with white knuckles.

No Scratchy.

The garden is as plain as possible – just a patio, a withered lawn, a bush. She spends warm days attacking anarchic weeds and keeping the grass shorn. There’s nowhere for him to hide.

He’s wandered off, out into the wild world.

Barbara takes a further step, unsticking her hand from the door and swaying in the open air.

‘Scratchy,’ she whispers.

All she can hear is music from a neighbouring garden, where a barbeque is winding down, and the chattering of teens over the back fence. Teenagers are very frightening, especially in packs: people will have been drinking at the barbeque and may be on the verge of losing control.

'*Scratchy,*' she calls, waving his food in the hope that he'll catch its scent in the air.

The back door slams behind her, and automatically locks.

Barbara stands with her back against the rough bricks of her wall. She's steadying herself, preparing to open her eyes. All around her night is sweeping in from the opposite side of the world, bringing derangements and unspeakable terrors. And she and Scratchy are both out in it, undefended.

She edges around the corner of her bungalow, still with her back to the wall, her dressing gown snagging on bricks. She has no plan at all, just an instinct to look at the Harrisons' house and draw comfort from their twinkling lights. Ben Harrison will be snoozing on the settee, while Laura reads a book and listens out with one ear for the boys upstairs.

Barbara looks across the parked cars in the road and sees Scratchy sitting bolt upright in the Harrisons' overgrown front garden, watching her.

It takes Barbara twenty minutes to summon courage to cross the road, and another ten minutes to achieve the feat. She can feel the tarmac through the soles of her slippers. She hears the menacing hiss of cars crossing at the T-junction twenty metres away. TV soundtracks ooze from open windows and jumble in her ears – gunfire, shouting, electronic beeping – a cacophony, chaos. She is sure that she will lose all strength in her legs and collapse across the central white lines of the road, where the camber feels like scaling a mountain.

Scratchy doesn't take his amber eyes from his mistress. She looks at him and finds the determination to reach the opposite pavement. Then her hand closes around the brick gatepost of the Harrisons' house and she is reminded of her childhood home, which looked just like this – a solid Victorian terrace with a bay window and a raggedy box hedge. Nothing grand, nothing special: just cosy.

Turquoise is a cheery colour for a front door. Scratchy has moved to sit right outside it, among the sandals. It's colder now, and growing darker by the second.

Heart thudding, hands tingling, Barbara rat-tats the letterbox.

No response.

She tries again, louder this time, while Scratchy coils around her ankles.

The porch light flickers.

‘You must have a warm drink,’ says Laura Harrison, dropping her cardigan around

Barbara’s shoulders. ‘It’s chilly out there, even if it’s summer.’

‘I don’t want to be any trouble,’ murmurs Barbara. She feels faint on this sofa, jumbled among kids’ toys and piles of clean folded laundry.

Scratchy has arranged himself next to Ben, and is receiving vigorous rubs to the golden ruff of his neck.

‘No trouble at all. Happy to help,’ says Ben, who has previously muttered to his wife that the old lady looks like she’ll keel over. ‘The locksmith won’t be long.’

‘He doesn’t usually go far,’ she explains, indicating Scratchy. ‘It’s not like him.’ ‘Call of the wild,’ winks Ben. ‘He’s quite often in our garden actually - aren’t you, eh?’ Scratchy closes his eyes in ecstasy.

Barbara looks out of the bay window and sees her bungalow, bare and bleak in the

last of the light.

‘You’re welcome to stay for dinner,’ smiles Laura, carrying in a tray with three mugs of tea.

‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly – ‘

Although…. why not, thinks Barbara. Why not go wild, just for tonight?