

Morning Star Part 3

He is gone. The space where he had been still warm; suffused with his smell. Oh God. He should have woken me. He won't have eaten properly, just left with a bowl of cornflakes in his belly, nothing more, and all that work all day on an empty stomach. He'll come home angry and then another night of silence, TV spilling out chatter when it should be us.

Then my own alarm: 6.30 Monday morning. Half an hour before the baby would need feeding and the boys will have to get ready for school. Fresh clothes packed lunches all of that. Monday Monday, blue Monday, manic Monday, tell me why I don't like Mondays, God, what we put ourselves through. Why it has to be like this I don't know, a sort of meaningless accretion of acts that we somehow allow to take control, like we're just machines following scripted actions. Why is it supposedly reasoning thinking animals choose to put themselves through this? You would think there'd be a revolution against it or something, but no, most of us just do what we have to do, or anyway I do the things *I* have to do: pushing back the covers, reaching my feet out for the ground, rush of blood as I sit upright, the dreams still clinging in funny little incomprehensible images. What were they? Empty grasslands, empty sky, I think, a large stone or rock maybe, nothing else. I always did dream strange dreams. My mother said, after the accident, that she always thought they had been a sign. Well. Through to the bathroom.

Radio on (quietly), warm loo seat one of the bonuses of summer, a full bladder's worth of pee comes rushing out, thank God, I feel half a stone lighter. Peer at myself in the mirror, still getting spots at my age, bags under eyes, creases around the mouth, the skin slowly loosening around my jawline. For a while you think that you're getting older but there's nothing much in the way of proof, but then when it happens, solid and irreversible, the fact of it facing you every morning, you seem to slip away from yourself faster and faster. So different now from the when I left university, that moment which back then had seemed to plunge me straight into adulthood, all my decisions suddenly mattering and life becoming serious, and yet then I had stood there looking out to who knows what future, not this one, I don't remember now. Those features I had then still somehow caught in my head when I think of myself, funny that, a mental image that probably won't change now. I sometimes catch myself in the mirror of a shop maybe (yeah, particularly shops, all the pictures of the young thin models airbrushed and made over into perfection) and there I am, a stranger to myself, an overripe flabby husk.

I suppose I had ideas back then; I lived in my own bubble of important stuff: Robert Graves and Homer, Plato and Aristotle, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and Dostoevsky, that whole poetry thing, what had it been again? There seemed to be this other life that hung tantalisingly close to mine, that I felt I could step across into, and then slowly it collapsed around me, the magic fading into the everyday and, well, things happen, don't they? Goodbye to all that, then, and a new life like putting on a new pair of clothes.

Off with the night dress and on with the shower, Radio 4 still talking to itself, I haven't really paid attention. Snake-hiss of water, rush of cold air slowly warming, one hand in the flow melting and reforming, ah yes now, time to step in, close the curtain about me and sluice off another day's filth, the toilet of Venus ha-ha, emerging fatter and older every day, greyer hair, not something Botticelli would wish to record. But still with

my eyes closed, ignoring my flesh and letting my body dissolve into water, this could be any time in my life, running up and down the years like scales on a piano. Maybe if I stand here and try hard enough I can time-travel.

But no, now the news bulletin on the radio swimming into my head, got me at last, stuck here and now in my own body, a Monday morning. News, a Proper English Voice announcing that the US army has killed 200 insurgents in Najaf. Two hundred. That's like the population of my street: 50 homes, I suppose about four people per household, some like mine a little more and some maybe just couples or pensioners, but yes, probably four per household, so about 200 people. Hair washed and scraped back, now my body, lathered but not like the adverts, clean though, a morning smell. So a day's work for the US army, 200 dead in that mysterious time during which news happens, somewhere between dusk and dawn, another day and out with the old, people may get bored and switch to another channel, new stories needed. 200 people. If Pretoria Road was wiped out by a bomb, maybe, everybody at home, or the homes bulldozed and the inhabitants shot, like happened a few years back, in Ramallah, wasn't it? God, I forget. All the irreplaceable stories and loves, the distinct and individual experiences of life, connecting things up in new ways, the Vietnamese family next door, maybe, how had they got here, what did they think of it, bare back yard, Nigerian soap operas booming out in the summertime from the house opposite. The white families further down with relatives on every street around, collective memories sinking way back before the closure of the docks; copper tubs and outside toilets, the rag and bone man driving his cart down the street, a Sunday treat of a boiled sheep's head bought down Rathbone Market. Just 200 people, but with them gone the world shrinks, becomes less precious.

It's an unforgivable action. Unforgivable and yet repeated daily, somewhere in the world.

And indeed it has happened here too (time for a last once-over, holding the shower head so close to my skin that the water stings.) In 1942 a bomb fell on the southern end of the road, flattening about half the houses for several streets around. I've seen a photocopy of the original photographs taken just afterwards, someone from the council archives came round once talking to the inhabitants, trying to get us interested in the area's history. They showed a mess of rubble and planking, barely identifiable as a row of housing, the violence of war suddenly concentrated and dumped upon civilian households, who knows how many dead while Churchill sat in his bunker and drank claret, the blast radius clear to this day by the new housing, squat 1980s design set back from the road and badly pointed, facing their neighbours across the yawning chasm of a century. Sometimes digging in the back yard with the kids we come across broken clay smoking pipes, tiny glass bottles, fragments of pottery and finest china, and every time, well, I wonder.

Just one bomb all those years ago and the ripples are still spreading out, still felt by all of us on the street. And still despite it people carry on, in our name, making new devils out of someone else's children for us to be afraid of, death after death and wrong piled upon wrong. It seems senseless, stupid.

That's humans, as my husband would say. I don't know why you get so upset; it isn't like you don't know.

I pull back the shower curtain and the sunlight's dazzling, slamming through the air with a force I can almost feel (of course I can, dope, it's heat, the miracle of the sun,

life giver and killer, remote and careless but nurturing and blistering anyway.) The steam catches in the morning rays, silver and tumbling and rushing together like a shoal of fish, as much a wonder as anything on a Monday morning. I have to open the window anyway, let it out and let the outside world in, got to get dry, white noise of traffic filtering in, trains sounding horns as they pass West Ham station. If ever I get annoyed about these things, the bombs and the fighting and whatnot, my husband accuses me of being naive. "All these wars, they've got to happen," he always tells me. "What do you think human nature is? We compete, no? So on a personal level, and so on a national level. Every country is fighting for itself, pushing for the best position, the best thing for its people. You can't stop that, it's just human nature. All this Iraq thing, if it wasn't them suffering then it would be us, and what would you rather? If this country hadn't in the past acted the way it did, then everyone here now would be living in squalor and some other damn bastard would be rich. How would you like that for your kids? You have to be realistic about this, so..."

So what? So we put up with this, for ever and ever and ever? Until every one of us is implicated, damaged, factionalised, our families broken up and sent to war or jihad or distant places in air-conditioned bunkers answering the telephone calls of fat paranoid citizens thousands of miles away.

We're afraid that if they win, they'll turn us into what we're trying to turn them into.

Off with the radio, God, I don't want my kids listening to *this*. Don't want either of my boys swallowing any of this crap and then when they're older finding themselves out in the desert pointing guns in terrified faces. Nobody should have to die for this, not for the shareholders, not for the board, not for the government. Not my sons, not my baby daughter, no. As it is, both the boys play war, the overspill of violence catching them up in its bloody hands; tales of rocket-propelled grenades and air attacks peppering their games. What is it with men? It gives me the creeps, don't they think about what they're doing, so many times I've almost said it, the words forming on my lips before I bite them back. No, of course you don't think. Nobody else does either.

But they wouldn't go. Unless it was over my dead body.

Time to get dressed, then. Back to the empty bedroom, air the sheets, wafting at my husband's smell, still hanging round when it isn't wanted, not like the man himself. Clothes, the endless trouble of what to wear, all that choice and always nothing suitable. A sunny day, didn't the forecast say? Made in India, China, Bangladesh, I can just imagine the conditions, have seen the cotton mills outside Bombay, the limb-ripping machinery not so different from the descriptions in *Hard Times* but just easier to forget, I guess, the other side of the world after all and well, we've all got cash flow problems, not our fault, is it?

Not our fault. The constant nagging difficulty of where to point the finger. Anyone but us, the weaker the better.

Easy to choose in the end, got to go to the supermarket this morning after all so no slumming it in tracksuit bottoms and an old T-shirt, my bum like the backside of a 69 bus, something more presentable and flattering, God knows I need it

[the odd flash of hot lust, who knows from where but like a bolt down my spine, knotting my womb, I'm too old for this surely but still acting like a schoolgirl when it happens]

so it came down to what's clean, what I can wear in summer, very little it seems. You used to dress better, my husband says, back when I first knew you, it's like you don't care anymore. Yes, well, curtains open and sun flooding in, a glorious blue sky, roses opening out in the garden. Things change. Some things become more important, others less so. Looking good around *him*, when he deigns to be here, well. Just time to comb my hair, a luxury, sometimes, on a school day, and then it's through to the boys' room, a sharp knock and the usual lack of answer. Out cold, heavy sleepers, taken after their father. Sometimes though, just sometimes, I get a quicksilver tingle of old old feelings, like a flashback I guess, deep irrational fear that one day I'll open the door and find them gone, never have existed maybe. Reality unravelled, just like it did before, well hopefully not but you always must be prepared for the possibility, so I was told. Some connections made in your head, well, it seems they just lay dormant but never entirely absent. Well I open the door and there they are anyway, eldest on the top bunk getting long and skinny, the younger one more compact, less of a monster, less trouble. They both need to be shaken, soft dreamlight in their eyes as they come round, then I watch the realisation sink in, Monday morning, school. I almost have to push the eldest one into the bathroom, the youngest lets me pet him before I send him down to the kitchen and now time to wake the baby, God knows what reaction, the last two mornings screaming.

Awake already, my youngest, my last. No more after that pregnancy: the exhaustion and rib-pain, the depression and mood-swings. I remember sitting on the stairs and just crying, oh God crying for hours, everything seemed so wrong. But here she is, after the agonising crawl of nine months, after the food cravings, the vomiting and the confusion of the other two. This time round I had to have the full discussion with the boys on Where Babies Come From: all their sensible and obvious questions seeming to have stupid replies. It's difficult to explain such a fundamentally inarticulate action, the level that it works at completely undercutting any language. And so I had:

“But why would you want a baby? Why did you have one?”

“Well, mummy and daddy love each other.” Maybe not true, but well, at that age, maybe love has to exist, how else to describe what happened?

“But why?”

“Well, that's what people do. When they're in love they make a baby together.”

“But why?”

A perfectly reasonable question I suppose, and well, no, I don't know either. Not during the pregnancy, certainly, sometimes feeling like I was nothing more than a weird flesh machine, a host for something hideous, not understanding why I was doing this, this endless reductive questioning threatening to dissolve me in a pool of meaninglessness. And then this at the end of it, the girl I so much wanted after two boys, round-faced big baby-eyed sitting up holding on to the bars of her cot, oh so serious as I walked in but now breaking into a big wide smile for mummy.

Heavy child already, lifting her up, soft sack warm against me. So little time like this, almost able to watch the child change from day to day, everything moves so fast and then so much time as a teenager, eight long years of worry and conflict, followed then by what? Oh God, I've asked other parents about their grown-up children, and some just shrug and look baffled, was it worth it, who knows, it's just what you do, isn't it, while others say sure, we're happy with how it turned out, proud of our kids, but really isn't

that just what people *say*? I don't know, there's such a wall of pretence, everything has to be seen to be fine, to have worked, to have meant something. It feels rather like smiling in photographs, however the family situation there we are grinning to the camera like this is all so much fun. When did that take over, I wonder, not like that back when; what are we trying to prove? But well, anyway, no answers, I can't trust those words about it all being fine. I have to work it out for myself. When my children are grown up do I even know what they could do to make me happy? What did I do? Well it's a bit strange, the whole period after the accident when I was in hospital has divided my life in two, the before and the after, the before being a bit of an alien country now, I don't really know what I thought. After a bit of messing around I found the one man and stuck with him, right from when I was 15, it seems a bit of a waste all through my later teenage years and through university, but well, I wasn't interested in that sort of thing, it was there and it provided me with security, support, I don't know. It was easy. I suppose I did was what I was meant to do: it kept my parents happy, it kept *him* happy, and as for me, I didn't really think. I just went with it, never really fought, especially after the accident when I was literally damaged goods, and I just let it carry me on to whatever conclusion. I think there always was a certain degree of expectation on me, what I should do with my life, and as a parent I guess there can't be anything worse than looking at your children and thinking: "oh God, I've failed." Well I hadn't let them think that, had more or less done what they asked and anyway, really, what else would I have done?

You do right, if you can. That's why the damn world hurts so much.

Pooh, time to change your nappy, maybe that's why you were awake. Must remember to buy more at the supermarket, otherwise it's the ones you don't like from the corner shop (instructions in Arabic) and then what a fuss. The eldest is out of the bathroom, God, that must have taken him all of 10 seconds, always a battle to get him to wash properly, but no time this morning, especially now. I shout through to let him know where his clean clothes are, then it's off with this nappy and yes, dear, what a mess. Incredible how she can sit here with so much shit smeared over her arse, having a bit of a strop now over the nappy change. So awful at first, I remember with the eldest being driven to tears; every time I tried to put a nappy on him he would roll away, naturally contrary, inherited straight from his father. It took me ages every time, I would be upset and he would be upset, what a performance. Now I don't even need to think: off with one, on with another, funny how things change.

That done, we can get you downstairs, food time. Still a bit huffy, by the look of you, but you'll come round. Up we go, back to the bosom of mummy. Quick check on the eldest, yeah, he's fine, staring cross-eyed at his tie but he'll get how to do it in the end, he always does, and trudge downstairs, floorboards creaking at the weight.

The youngest is eating: good. Get the baby seat out and strap the baby in, her bemused little stare, legs and arms waving. Begin heating the milk, get out a jar of baby goo. Something odd about the bowl of cornflakes; I give it another look.

"Is there any milk in there?"

"Yes mum."

"Is there? I can't see it."

"It's down the bottom. Where milk *goes*."

"Well maybe you'd like to put a bit more in. It'll taste better, you know."

"Don't like milk."

Oh God, ungrateful little wretch. I can't help but laugh. "You're lucky that you're not made to drink it. When I first started school we were made to drink a pint of it a day."

Until Mrs Thatcher got in. I dimly remember that, coming into school at the start of one term and at break time, no milk. Thatcher milk snatcher, that's what they had called her. And all these years later we're back to the local authority making sure kids get their fresh fruit and vegetables every day, back to the nanny state Mrs Thatcher would say, but well, if it was the only way you could ensure that, the only way these kids were going to get a chance, then wouldn't you, too?

My kids too young yet to realise that everything goes in circles, a stupid merry-go-round with no progress, no outcomes, nothing learnt. Our memories are too short, our lives are too short, our worlds are too small.

And so God or science or economics to answer it all.

"Blech," he says, my young child.

"Just make sure you have enough so that we don't have to do that here."

Despite that, no more milk goes in the cereal. Here comes the eldest, tie properly done but the knot pulled so tight that it had shrunk to the size of a peanut, material from the fat end of the tie exploding out crazily. His trousers tucked into his socks too, oh God, what planet does he come from? He gets his bowl, empties cornflakes into it (and over the table, and the floor) sits himself down opposite his brother and sprinkles his breakfast with milk. Ah, so that's where the other one gets it from. I should have known. However will they grow up, one so crazy and the other just copying?

The youngest claims to have finished and goes off to get washed. He's eaten half a bowl of cornflakes, what does he live on, air? I know I was that bad, so many of us are, so maybe like my husband says I shouldn't worry. But what to do, I've got to fight it anyway because they really should eat, get the nutrition they're meant to. I'm trying to bring them up properly, who wouldn't want to do that?

The milk is heated, and I can leave it for a little bit, try to feed the baby some of this organic green goo. She looks totally disinterested, and well, I can't say it looks tasty to me, but the usual pantomime of big smiles, silly noises and flying spoons gets at least some of it past the barrier of her mouth. She masticates the stuff grudgingly (its food, it keeps you alive, what's the matter?) and most of it seems to slither back out of her mouth and down her chin.

Dear God, it's madness, and for what?

The eldest has finished, eaten a little more than his brother. I send him off to put on his shoes and get his bag packed, make sure that his brother has got his pencil case and whatnot too. Time to feed the baby her bottle, usually another palaver but this morning she looks quite keen, sucking at it with gusto and making all those funny gurgles and huffs and chokes, really, table manners darling. After about half the bottle she gets bored, turns her head away and flaps her arms. I wipe the drool from her face.

OK, that wasn't too bad. Leave the dishes, they can wait, quickly whack together a few sandwiches for the boys; brown bread, butter, cheese and tomato, chocolate bar, orange, carton of apple juice. Both kids getting ready now, I can hear them squabbling in the hall, right well then time to go, isn't it, they both collect their lunch boxes (Spiderman for the youngest, the Incredible Hulk for the eldest, quite appropriate really) and I tell them once again to check their stuff as I get the baby swaddled and put in the pram.

Right then, out of the house, another day, another week.

It's not a long hop to school, no more than a few streets, but they're still both young and, well, some of the kids round here. Really, looking round now, the older ones heading up to the community school and the younger ones like the kids following the Pied Piper, streaming through the long terraces and narrow alleys towards Star Lane. Usually in gangs, more expensively dressed than I'd permit for my kids, designer wear or the sports clothes worn by their elder siblings, Nike and Adidas and Reebok, regulation JD Sports bag slung across their shoulders, white baseball caps, mobile phones, generally the more upmarket the gear the worse the behaviour. Acting in a way they think is adult, leering strutting walk bristling with studied aggression.

I see it sometimes in my own kids and it bothers me. They watch all this stuff on television and maybe even if it doesn't infect them too much, what are they really to the programme makers and the advert makers but just hollow vessels, things to be filled with the desire for this or that, you've seen the show now buy the product, don't you know we've got to make a living here? Walk down the high street and see: children are either clothes horses, eating machines or bombs just waiting to go off, packed to bursting point with boredom and needing to have FUN, preferably as expensively as possible, buy this product and find a solution. None of it about the child and all of it about money, a sour and cynical note struck that I'm sure children recognise subliminally, realise that whatever the protestations they aren't worth a thing, it's the product that people feel is important. And all of us trying to make money, keep a roof over our heads and food on the table, it's a free market, who's going to turn round and say that this is wrong? Oh God, I'm getting old, mentally as well as physically, afraid of the changes in culture, confusing my innocence as a kid with the world of my childhood, which wasn't innocent at all. No.

Well anyway, future or past or whatever, look at some of these kids. Do I really want my children mixing with them? One of the mothers over there, she can only be nineteen and she's got a kid in the first grade, another two years younger, [and it could so, so easily have been me, lost my virginity at 15 and no protection, too embarrassed to go to the chemist and buy condoms, he of course didn't care until later when I made him] I meet her sometimes in the shop and she's disgraceful, no please or thank you to the shopkeeper, won't even talk to him, eyes averted she barks out orders, gives him the wrong change, reluctantly spills more coins on the counter when he insists, hostile, racism pure and simple, maybe her old man goes on about immigrants all the time, you see that hatred in her eyes, spilling out from the core of her. Sometimes I think, well, someone's got to change that, it's not acceptable for anyone to behave in that manner, and her kids looking on, learning, my kids looking on and learning too. But nothing is done, that's freedom, her eldest and my youngest boy in the same year, nothing I can do there, no choice in the matter at all. I occasionally getting in the mood where I think that if I could only hide my children away... But then, why have kids in the first place? Surely dolls would do.

The press scare me, of course. All these stories about children, how true it is I don't know, how true are the press, ever? It's impossible to see inside all of the nation's households to verify these stories are of drunken criminal fornicating children, but they're not very true, probably, it all just nicely fits whatever political agenda. But the stories, like Chinese whispers, the more lurid they get the more people want to believe them, the more they think of everything as being out of control, and I don't know, maybe

then the more real it becomes. I suppose if it were true, well, I don't think I could blame the kids at all. What they have to put up with, bland sanctimonious rubbish on one side and cynical soulless pop music/television/youth culture on the other, their views spuriously sought only to give credibility to others, to make somebody else some money, opinions planted by advertisers masquerading as children on chat rooms and websites, viral marketing, buy this to be cool, listen to this, wear that, drink this, kids as under the cosh of adults as they have ever been, but no longer parents and family but rather the advertising industry, profit margins, shareholders and pension funds, *people who don't care*, this whole invisible world growing fat by leeching off them, feeding them less and less dressed up as more and more. If it were me, I would act disgracefully too, I would try to act worse than all the stories in the paper, because I would have realised that no one has any respect for me, that I was worth less than the shoes and phones and all the junk of modern life. Kids are pretty clever at working that one out.

Well, my children, what can I give you against that? Love?

Love. We approach the school gates, a melee of screaming running playing figures making patterns in the yard, skipping ropes and games of tag and footballs inexpertly hoofed across the tarmac, the big old Victorian building frowning censoriously down on it all. I kiss the youngest, who lets me, but the eldest backs away as I reach for him, dragging his brother by the arm, too cool for kisses now, too aware of everybody else, and they run off through the gates and into the yard. Blinking, losing then momentarily, always the thought eating at me that maybe one day I will come back here at home time and wait and wait by the gate, nobody there, no faces making sense. I try to imagine myself as not being their mother, as someone just watching a crowd of children. After years of filtering everybody else out and just looking for them, what if I don't search, what if I stare at them all, so they all become the same, lose meaning. Looking at them as if they were grass or sky. A sort of electric thrill running through me, like letting go, like leaving this.

Maybe I should worry less. There's always this opposition: is it the world that's so bad, or is it just me? No answer, of course, but maybe I should ask the question less. All the years of children coming here; the offspring of dockworkers, Lascar sailors, the tent makers and rope makers who used to line Commercial Road, the long-established Chinese community, more recently Africans and South Asians, did these people worry? Even if they did, they have gone on anyway, just doing what in their worlds had to be done.

And, so far, this has usually been enough. But.

Everything connects up now, like a winning line in a game of noughts and crosses. Everyone, everywhere implicated. What we do here in the world's fourth richest country doesn't just affect ourselves, if ever it did. You could go mad thinking about it, me with my clothes made in India, my TV set in China, who knows what conditions, what these people put up with, just so that someone like myself, by accident of being here and nowhere else, I can live in what to them is unimaginable luxury. Not that it is, all these worries from violent crime to obesity, these stories of children misbehaving, sexual disease rates rising, pensions crises. It should be paradise and somehow isn't. It should be easy to make life better for everyone, not just here but everywhere, and yet somehow there isn't a will, isn't a way. We always turn back from doing the right thing, like it's something built in to every human being, some point of existence that we can't get past.

We're only allowed to get so far, then we fall back again. The devil, Dostoevsky would say, the devil in everyone, that dumb line of destruction that sooner or later takes possession of us all.

This frustration I feel that my husband calls naivety. It isn't; he is wrong. Someone has to stop this, somehow. This madness. Or...

Shake these thoughts out, they're bad for me. I listen to the screams and laughter from the yard. Real life, part of me says; another part of me tells me that this is a veneer, a charade of normality that doesn't apply to most people and most of the world. We conspire to forget this because either it's convenient or else because we feel helpless, know we can do nothing about it. Well. Both of my sons have become caught up in a football match, the eldest receiving the ball as I watch, dinking past a couple of players before firing home between two piles of jumpers. Goal. It's enough to bring tears to my eyes, and I'm grinning like an idiot, the small things you know, the ones that keep you going. Time to head back; we've got to do the shopping.

"It's just us two now, kiddo, isn't it?" She smiles back at me, sticking one arm out of the pram and waving it about. "Gah!" she tells me, then again for good measure: "Gah!"

"That's right darling. Gah." Another few months and she'll be speaking, with all the power she will gain from that.

I'm not the only mother walking away from school with a pram, but I'm certainly one of the eldest. Statistically, this part of town has a younger population than anywhere else in the country. The women have their children younger too, so I've always been a bit of an anomaly, sharing my pre-natal classes with a bunch of teenagers and women in their early twenties. Like I said, I could so easily have got pregnant at 15, those first few times, and what would have happened to me? I'd still be a housewife, still married to the same man, probably, but one of my kids would now be grown up and gone away. Is that all there's been in my decision, nothing more than waiting until I was older to do exactly the same thing, just a matter of timing? I sometimes wonder if all that knowledge and stuff you're meant to accrue with age, the degree maybe that my husband mocks as useless, whether any of that taught me anything at all. Maybe it would have, were it not for the accident. I don't know; perhaps it would be comforting to think that the accident didn't change anything at all, which at least is the way my husband views it. But then I always fitted into his plan, he sees the world in these great big sweeps of time, presuming our life forward like he's always presumed I'll do what he asks of me.

And maybe, one day, he'll be wrong.

Back through these old brick streets heading home, past corner shops and cracked tarmac, untidy gardens and rows of cars, graffiti on walls and fences, the dogshit and litter, all the tiny tiny things that make up so much of life. "Back home and then straightaway out again," I tell the baby, who is looking at me. "We have to go to the supermarket, you and me, see if we can get the shopping done before you fill your nappy again, no? Otherwise Daddy won't have any tea."

He would want his tea ready, would Daddy, in around half-seven or eight o'clock, skipped lunch and starving, low blood sugar, foul mood. I've told him repeatedly that he will make himself ill working in this way, but he just shrugs. Well, I know that work keeps us in nappies and Nike trainers, keeps the roof over our heads, petrol in the car, but even so.

Even so, spending time together just emphasises all the space there is between us. Something we've always avoided talking about.

Just after I finished my degree, and before the accident put paid to such ideas probably for good, I had thought about doing a PhD. I had a title and everything: *Love and the End of Ages*, I still remember it, still remember hawking it round a few English departments and getting nowhere. I had a fascination with romantic, destructive love; the sort of thing I have never felt, it has always been a million miles away from my life. I don't think my hypothesis was very sound; looking at love poetry as a sort of indicator of decadence, an oracle for the collapse of a particular order of things. One of my problems was in defining love; for something assumed as universal, so talked about and written about, such a variety of feelings examined over the ages in such depth, it is a word that barely has any meaning at all. I knew what I didn't mean by love, but what I did mean was difficult to describe. I settled on an example, as far as I can see the ultimate example of this, which is the love of Menelaos and Paris for Helen. Isn't that it, really, the Western idea of love, that it should launch ships and bring down kingdoms, that everything should be bent to it: the fate of nations and the fate of gods? Love as the one true axis, the ideal.

Love that, I imagine, is just the hot air of courtiers and Casanovas, courtesans and convent girls. Love is something I know from my own children, a hard thing and practical, something lodged in me like a stone. The other, my God, it's such an indulgence, something to be scared of. I've always told myself I would never want it; it's something my husband has never elicited in me, not even in the early days, I don't think I would have stuck with him if he had. And sometimes I think that I've got it all wrong, that I've sold myself short, given in too easily. A sort of sick queasy feeling as sometimes, you know, that hot love which could split worlds open rises up in me, all unspent and too late, a sort of recklessness as if I could do something stupid, as if I could smash my whole life trying to do this feeling justice. As if it could still change the meaning of the whole world.

Oh God. An occasional little pain in my stomach, like I could vomit. [instead I look at my child and smile]

Look at me anyway, grey-haired Mum of three, sagging a bit and getting flabby. God, none so foolish.

Back home, the holes in the pointing still needing sorting out, the unwashed windows, crisp packets littering the front yard (or Off Street Parking, as the estate agents call it,) weeds pushing up between the paving slabs. Must get all of that done, no good waiting for my husband to do it, I'd be waiting forever, it's like being a single mother sometimes. Unlock the door, the baby getting happy because she's back, struggling through with the pram and apologising, sorry darling, one set of chains for another, this time the car seat, please don't cry.

Nappy's still dry, a quick glass of water for me and do you want any more milk? No, turned head, not interested. OK then, fine, here we go out again, lock the door and unlock the car, a bit hot inside but no matter, we'll open the window and you'll be fine. Strap you in the back, blowing raspberries at me and flapping your arms, going into play mode are you? Sorry kiddo, not the right time. Window down just a little bit, shut the door softly (checking for fingers) then get myself in the front, adjust the seat, seatbelt on.

Key in the ignition, motor spluttering into life, handbrake off and moving into gear. OK, here we go.

I spend hardly any time with my husband. I'm not even sure I know who he is, if ever I did. Funny how back then I could have been so sure, and, well, now maybe I'm looking for different things. He always had about him a promise, as if he knew something no one else did, and that one day he would impart it to me as well. Now I think that's just a way some men have, and any revelations, really, have to come from inside, they can't be told. His promise, if he had one, turned out to be bogus, or at least something that isn't needed in this world that I've found myself, of babies and children rather than magic and charm. He just avoids the family, like a charlatan found out, working at his work from dawn until dusk, coming home and grunting when spoken to, eating in silence in front of the TV. His kids are like space aliens to him, he doesn't know what to do, and me, well, I seem to be a riddle that he can no longer remember the answer to. I let the bus pass, then pull out into Hermit Road, drive past the grocery stores and fried chicken joints, betting shops and Chinese takeaways, boarded up pubs and international call centres, the strange transient life of a shifting population, neither quite one thing or another, the whites slowly moving out to their Essex Valhalla but so much debris left behind, the pie and mash shops and claret-and-blue chippies sitting next to Afro haircare centres and Turkish food stores. The only time I do talk to him is through the kids or about the kids. My God, all of a sudden so meaningless, just a pattern of life I've fallen into. What on earth keeps us together? Routine, I suppose, the cruise control of everyday life. And anyway, it's so awkward splitting up, the kids, both sets of parents, and if we got divorced would things be so much better anyway? I don't know, don't know at all, I've just lived to this set of assumptions that I've never really questioned, never asked what it really meant. Is this what most people do? Is it usually like this, unfeeling but comfortably familiar maybe, or maybe not, just getting by, no more thought about it than that? I'm probably no different to anybody.

Turn right and onto Barking Road by the McDonalds. Funny that, the McDonalds, the only place round here where everybody goes, where everybody is truly equal, black or white or Asian or whatever, both in terms of the staff behind the counter and the customers in front. It is common ground, a little oasis of social and racial equality as around it the city ossifies and becomes closed: you are where you came from, and condemned to that. Funny. The very hate symbol for the anti-globalisation movement is one of the few places we can escape from the parochialism of race and class, where the rigid social codes coming tumbling down.

And that's the thing the protesters would get rid of. It seems counter-productive for a movement that deems itself the "Rainbow Coalition." What would they see it replaced with? Don't they understand that the cafes and bars that they themselves champion are deeply alienating to most of us, rooted in an elitist and exclusive ethos? I would agree with anybody who criticises McDonalds, who tries to change their purchasing, production or cooking methods, their treatment of staff, their monolithic and inflexible image grinning from every city on earth. Someone's got to, after all, because governments aren't, or daren't (apart from the loony fundamentalist variety, of whatever religious flavour) but to destroy it altogether would be to display a village mentality, a retreat from reality, a denial of the universality of human needs and also human desires in a world that was connected up like a line in noughts and crosses.

God. I laugh out loud and can see in the mirror the baby giving me a quizzical look. I almost sound like Thomas Friedman. What did he say - that no two countries with a McDonalds in them had ever gone to war? This was shortly before Nato started bombing Belgrade, which of course had a branch, nice timing Thomas. That hasn't stopped him spouting more free-market utopian lunacy ever since, in spite of the overwhelming evidence against his ideas. I guess he can't; he would look a fool: "No, sorry, all those years and I was wrong." Best keep digging. What with one side and the other, the protesters and the free-marketeers, and maybe the governments too, God, three extremes, and all wrong, what are we to do?

A traffic jam on Barking Road, exhaust fumes rattling out from pipes and greying the air. We creep slowly along past Vietnamese takeaways, cheap clothing outlets, the Nigerian night club, Rathbone Market crawling up on the left-hand side, the shitty Sixties design sucking all the soul from the place, a shadow now of the pre-war pictures that I've seen, the only market in the borough not filled to capacity. Wait at the lights, the usual weird mix of people crossing, what are they all doing, and on a Monday morning? Past now the Royal Oak pub, above which Frank Bruno had learned his trade in years gone by, the structure half demolished now and being rebuilt as luxury flats. You can't move for blue plaques in the West End but out here history only seems fit to be demolished, time and time again. Here we are, nudge left after the Kwik Save, the A13 lofted overhead on a brutal flyover, a stinking line of morning traffic glittering in the sunlight. Recently extended and already full, the new section of the flyover buries what had been Canning Town's only entry in *A Literary Guide to London*, I remember leafing through the wafer-thin section on East London and looking. Under "Limehouse/Isle of Dogs, mostly E14" came Bridge House, written about by Farson as he and the future Lord Snowdon popped in to join the dockworkers throwing back the hard stuff and leering at the strippers. See what I mean? If it isn't for the likes of McDonalds we don't have a hope. Our writers and thinkers and protesters couldn't care less.

Sharp left onto the A13, much clearer heading east. I get to put my foot down a little, body folding nicely into the seat as we accelerate, check in the back mirror; the baby's asleep. What I think really upsets me is that nothing will change. Things could be so good, or if not good, then at least better. Starvation in Darfur, conflict in Iraq or Afghanistan, none of them have to happen. I really think that most people are reasonable, I really do, but somehow it always seems be the unreasonable ones who are in charge, who deliver missiles upon our homes and troops in our towns, who take us into wars that we don't really understand, playing on fear and xenophobia and ignorance. At the same time they don't even protect us. Our food is still full of rubbish, we're growing too fat while other countries starve, we demand to pay less for our goods, ruining lives and livelihoods in other parts of the world as a consequence, the amount we consume, the trail of waste we leave, the oil in our plastics and our engines, well, look where that's getting us. And the weird thing is that these are the important issues and no one will do anything about them. The people we feed off have no right of return, they're unknown and unseen, usually impoverished, uncared for. Surely the basic human thing to do would be to help, to have compassion? But no politician will do a thing. It isn't an area democratic politics can touch. They can send troops into another country to kill God knows how many civilians, yeah, that's fine, but stick a few extra pence on petrol,

modify the behaviour of a global corporation maybe, find some way to stop all this fighting, well, uh uh, are you mad? They would never see office again.

It's a collective insanity. The devil in us. Why do we have this lack of collective will to sort things out? Always fighting, fear.

Stop brain, please. No answers, no answers at all, everyone stumbling around looking for them. Well somebody has to do something; no-one else is. What had Aristotle said - something about democracy being the best of a set of bad choices, benign dictators being rather difficult to find. Well maybe that was wrong, when democracy means all the decisions really been made in one country, a babbling cesspit of misinformation passing for a press, nothing seems able to hold these people in check, vote them out and you find they're in again, wearing different bodies that's all. No accountability, no way for the rest of the world to say stop.

Even if it would, and that's debatable.

Switch on the radio, hit the find button and look for anything. The baby still asleep. Outside the car the world moves past in a cinematic sweep, not real somehow, a sort of empty romance rising in me, a yearning for something. Canning Town fades into Custom House fades into Beckton, long long lines of red brick houses, doors like stopped mouths and windows blinded by net curtains, the parked cars and people walking by and the rooms behind facades, the sudden smallness of life, just something barely scratched into the ground as I rush past, forgetting everything I see as I see it, an endless recurring dream all of the same.

And suddenly it changes, like a hole opening in my mind. A wide grassy plain stretching out to the horizon, wind rushing through in waves, clouds of spores lifted up and tumbling across a cloudless sky. Nothing else, no houses no buildings no roads no people not even any birds or insects. So beautiful, wouldn't it be better this way?

[with all the animals dead]

The radio hits upon Marvin Gaye and the world snaps back, shit thank God, drifting across lanes, the picture still reverberating through my head. Empty grassland and infinite peace. Think of the baby, think of the music. Marvin Gaye, held in this one moment forever, replayed time and again just exactly at that one point, that devastating loss, hearing it through the grapevine. Listen as his voice breaks with exquisite agony on those high notes, such a vocal performance like he had thrown his whole being into it, used himself up, had known somehow what was going to happen to him and that was always what was so thrilling, so spine-chilling about the song. I get the same sort of thing about Otis sitting on the dock of the bay, or from reading Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, funny that, no? Like they could feel it coming, like somehow the future could bleed its feelings into the present moment, a sort of dumb and useless knowledge. Oh God, electricity surging through my nerves, squeezing my belly, my God what was it that happened? I feel I can barely drive.

Here's the sign, yes, turn-off for the Savacentre, indicator on mirrors checked slashxx across the dotted white lines and smoothly into the exit lane. Borne like a helpless babe (like my own in the back, world within a world, what meaning, her carried by me and me carried by what?) down the slip road and deposited at the car park entrance, not much choice where to go. No choice, wasn't that the thing, wasn't that

where we went wrong? What did we ever do with choice but waste it, like Dr Faustus with his devil-given power? The car park, wasteland of the machine age, dead metal all the same, sun winking all the same from a thousand windscreens. Try to make sense of it all, what it *does*, why all the money and materials and labour, the ingenious engines, black gold fuel sucked in and death spat out, heat dissipating, energy gone, entropy. Just this one car park, and then all the cars everywhere. It is coloxal, unimaginable.
rfsifduglasdf

I nose my way round the ranks of cars (ha ha), find a space and get myself in at the third attempt, not bad. The baby's woken up and is grumbling, wanting me. XXCCCCIt's OK, you can come back to me soon. I know you like the supermarket; lots of shiny things to stare at, lots of smells, sounds. Wind up the window, get the reusable bags out of the glove compartment (almost everything in there apart from gloves) off with the seatbelt and out, that hit of morning air, petrol-rich, white noise shriek of motorway. Unstrap the baby, check the nappy (nothing so far: good) heave her up to mummy's chest, close the door, central locking and we're away.

That noise, that motorway noise almost ever-present everywhere; the sound of the slow destruction of things, glaciers cracking, mountains being ground down. A thousand people bleeding in and out of London, a new tidal river and just as important as the old one. On a windless day like today a nasty yellowish stain creeps in from the horizon, nose and fingernails and lips drawn in a fine soot line: the pollution from it all.

We walk through row upon row of cars, the baby gurgling, prodding my breastbone with her hand. The supermarket rises before us like a recently landed spaceship from a bad science-fiction movie, blandly futuristic, cheap but sleek, *The Jetsons* for the suburbs, as much architectural experimentalism as E16 is to be allowed. Faxxtw4gh people haul their bulk from car to this temple and then back again, ritual worship, back and forth, back and forth, the space opening up, an infinite plane of sterile metal, struts and glass and engines all reaching out to connect with me, to take their place, bind with my tendons and nerves and talk to me, everything making sense as it should do, the flow and ebb of the cosmos, the whispering of machines over burst suns and shrouded births, this need to carry implacably on, *to make everything right*, controlling balancing everything each person each life, it must be all right at the end otherwise no people no animals, just spores blowing across an empty grass landscape. I *cannot* fail xxchierascxxxx xawgfazx who are these people, really, that are staring at me? Staring. Stop staring.

[everything slips back, unravels, leaves me naked me]

The chosen few, the Western elite, like it or not that's what they are, with their demand for cheaper prices and cheaper petrol and better living, the axis of the world swinging round them, the factories and lives of the rest of the world, all these distant lands where the future holds less and less promise, but less and less chance of escape too.

Heart beating hard. Oh God, at least if I can get the shopping done and get back home. Everything beating at me, all these thoughts, the unfairness of it all for so many and nobody doing anything, the constant hurt of it, oh if only I could change it, wave a magic wand, say. Always wanting more; I want more, should that be fair? That grey aching void where maybe I should have felt love, oh God, could I start again, aging

mother of three with this *thing* inside me, inside my head, I don't know. Shut it out shut it out shut it out. The sky, the ground banal, normal, nothing's happening, no, don't be scared. It isn't coming back. The baby still here. A pound deposit in the trolley, lift the baby into the seat: "Wheee!" She gurgles a laugh, grinning and dribbling, kicking her legs and yelling. Big pair of lungs, an opera singer in future years, maybe. An extravagant push of the trolley gets her laughing again, dodgy wheels, angling half sideways we head through vast glass sliding doors and into the climate-controlled atmosphere, the eerie supermarket utopianism.

That huge great sweep of metal ceiling, oh God, like everything beneath it is just wafer-thin, will evaporate if I so much as blink. Look around, remember that it's real, solid. Reach out to touch something, let the outside world bleed in, infect me. This place like a little fake community, a plastic diorama, a fantasy village. [xxxxxdjfgeraqwxxzzz] An automatic gate swings open before us and we sweep into the main hall, that ceiling archhh5eing overhead, signs dangling down and rippling gently in the air-con breeze. Frozen Meat, Eggs, Breakfast Cereal, Canned Vegetables, Male Grooming. Checkout counters recede in correct perspective to the far side of the hall. Conversation is smeared over the electric hum, random xzzwurds caught here and there, irregularly spaced announcements zver the tannoy concerning special offers, shoes scuffff on on the shiny floor and wayward trolleys squeak. People eye each other furtively, taut comparisons between each other's clothes or kids, the amount of shopping, the quality. It doesn't matter what we do on the outside, here we are reduced to just the endless holes in our bellies, the machines in us pushing us on.

Just got to get the shopping, get out. Can't just leave; my husband's dinner, he'd go mad.

Have I remembered the list? No, of course not, sgkhrt bound to forget something vital but never mind, can't go back. The baby has gone all pie-eyed, staring at every little thing, reaching out her arms and waving, wanting. Vegetables? Onions carrots peppers large sack of potatoes, thank God for the car. Fruit - got to get the boys eating more, so apples oranges kiwi fruit. [all the people that starve, that can't do this] Manoeuvre through the trolley jam (some woman staring blankly at the celery, a pile-up building nicely behind her) and on to the tins: tinned soup tinned spaxxd3etti tinned beans (so many tins and no more Cornish tin mines, well was it actually tin, I don't think so, they must be mining the earth hollow whatever it is - oh no, I remember, it all becomes rubbish and we stuff it back in the earth again, maybe in a hundred years we'll be mining it back out.) On again, like a roll of film, unreal, touching everything carefully as if it will rip, expose that grey dead waste whispering underneath, past a line of froxxen goods, grab a pizza, a Friday treat for every38owgref, watch the labels stretching out along the aisle, a blur towards infinity, merging at a point which calls me. Shut it out shut it out. Dancing down the aisles, edging past the other happy shoppers, keep my mind just on this, speaking to myself to keep the voices out [xxz] special offer four litres of Coke for the price of two! Only today! Dfgwrep; wrong turn here, find myself by washing powder rather than frozen meat, but xxadnyway I need thixx too, saghrsegstaring as the washing powder stares back, blue packets green packets orange packets biological non-biological tablets liquid economy boxes colour-friendly economy or luxury. My God, the banal nature of these choices, something I never wanted but am forced into anyway. What did I want? The wrong thing, probably, now I want love, I want a heart that's full not empty,

some fucking meaning and what I get is cheap food cheap clothes made in India Bangladesh words on the television meaning nothing. That's capitalism, no? Everything you don't want and nothing you do, your only say over the sort of washing powder you buy. A stitch-up, good and proper. It's the future of my daughter, my sons, my God think of the future and my heart cracks like ice [shut it out] and all I XCCCCcan really choose is washing powder. Reach out to the packet and the packet reaches out to me, the world seems to bend, bulge, tear with a sound all wrong in my head. Blink, [dsg;fjadzzxxxxzzzzz] like the lights have gone out in my heart saghaedgf, oh Goxx, deadness spilling out, one thing then another caught by grey, slowed and killed and gone, trolley reaches up metal lines about my daughter, God no, not her, screaming all through me anything but that but I can't move, can't get through to her, watching cold as her skin becomes palsied and slick with metal, eyes gone still and lightless traced by filaments she glazes over, is swallowed, made a metal lump that cracks open and then inside it nothing; she's gone. Daughter, my baby, pain like fire like red hot metal filling my veins and screaming out, everyone else still here and staring, [what are you doing? This isn't proper, really] xxxxxxvvvvvvvvvaruflegsrswlhadsfsa\zxscvvsaedawv xx oh God no, I'm sorry, darling, I loved you really whatever, sterile sick smell xccleaking throustgh the air, watxxcing, watdning as the washing powder watches back, xvvvvvvvvvvvvafilah\dfa gdsfdgs gsedpghreswtjkn hgsodigf speaking to me in strange vvoizelexxx words,

[xcvsd;ngjrjnrg asrvsae;wsaSGKL sgodjad]

opening hge up in desire and pouring itself into me, sdagdfdsachalky the froxxen poultry xcxrising on stubbby plughned wings from the frozen meat aisle, headlessz dead animals packed dismembered gutless into plastic bags rising now, breaking their shackles, neckx outstretched, blood and feathers and elided bowels all pouring themselves into me, the legggzx of llamb anx haunches of venison, borlotti beans, rsdgg peppers and littres of XXXxcxoke all poured into me, all the world's shit, I wanted it, everything connectx and finds its right place, becomes one, scddenly m3kes senx like a line in noughts and croxxex, a junkyard of human desire prexxing at me to xxxxxxxxave them, heart smeared by cream cakx and chicken tikka masala, the pictures on TV, advert girlx and prostitutes and housewives washing up, the warx, the oil, dead body front pages, blxated belllies too full xnd too empty, endless speeches sex diseases xx everything tsfghching me, becomes me I have to stop it all

xxx xfase;ouhwzXZZZZZZ

xx

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx all things, ceiling bowing down to touch me, paper-thin atom-thin the world shreds open into harsh metallic sterile space, xvvvvvvvvvvvszagfks blood pumped by maxxines, a regulation pressure and speed, no feeling, body suspended, data twitchinggg g gg through me no eyes no ears no mouth just this svvrfae xzfvsel0rg, xx this love, sagfsarjh'gaew xxxxxxxxvvvviewfewqxc and the world flips, agony of remembering how it did this, just g gone I'm sorry I loved, sorry sorry sorry

everything suddenly gone, that other nature swallowed like a bag turned inside outxxxxx
zzzzzzzzzzvveaccxxx.

[clear. Myself now again]

I let myself extend outwards like roads and telephone lines and footpaths, stretching to the furthest places of the universe, drawing everything within, becoming it all, a familiar comfort and horror as its voices surge through me. I know what I have to do, what has to be done. I suffer their pain as they wait for me, wait for me to change everything, to save them.

[xxxxxxxxxxxxzzasgvrja'gerpgwmrwgt gfae zzzzzzzzvedwur4egfwzxxx xxx]

I will do it. I have to. Otherwise we all die.

xx xxxxxxxxaswdqAWDSdshfarszxx

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