

I

The pile is tailed, legged and eyeless; a mischief of rats crowding at their mother's teated flank. You can see the blue meat inside them, their organs like small dirty patches, their skin so translucent that you can see the milk passing through and turning their stomachs white.

The seesaw is red and at either end there is a wooden doll shaped like an old-fashioned clothes peg. The figures have blue bodies, yellow wool for hair and blank, pink faces. When you pull the toy by its string, it trundles along, the dolls moving up and down and up and down.

On Facebook someone has posted a clip of old film that has been digitised. The scratched frames show a factory workshop where two women in skirts and blouses are wrapping wooden spheres with newspaper. They spread wallpaper paste on with their hands and lay paper strips onto the spheres, occasionally looking expressionlessly into the camera. In the next scene, they are adding strips of burgundy leather and putting the dark red balls on a wooden rack to dry. Once there, the globes oscillate gently.

Now there are three women at a workbench. The one in the pink cardigan with pearlescent buttons sponges paste

onto strips of coloured paper and lays them over one of the burgundy balls. In a close-up, it becomes clear that the woman beside her is smoothing on a section of West Africa, the deep yellow tones of its landmass complementing her mustard polo neck and gold, clip-on earrings. The dark-haired woman next to her has a palette of ochre, mauve, myrtle and jade, and is using a fine paintbrush to touch up the seams in the Levant. In the final scene, a man places each globe onto a wire stand and uses a spray gun to add a layer of laminate shine.

Tom and I are in the van driving from Glasgow to Birmingham to visit my parents. The rain is fierce. As lorries pass us, spray covers the windscreen and we are plunged under water. The screen clears to find us dry but gasping, Tom gripping the wheel. The wipers have a noisy scrape as they smear the screen then clear it, the reality outside shifting between filmic bokeh and HD wet motorway. My hand is on his leg, or his hand, shifting as he shifts gears. Cocooned in the car, he tells me things; one time he told me that he wanted to have a son and teach him something real. Or a daughter. Teach them things that are useful.

The van only picks up the radio in sporadic bursts. Tom twists the dial and it tells us that we are building a new 25-million-pound prison in Jamaica. David Cameron, during a visit to the island, is asked about reparations. He replies: *This is about the future relationship and about what we should be doing together economically in terms of trade and investment.* He explains how the prison's construction

is to be paid for out of the foreign aid budget and will house around 300 Jamaicans who are currently serving sentences in the UK. *That is what this visit is about,* Cameron says. *It's about talking sensibly about the future.*

It's at times like these this, despite the fact that he clearly does not come from Stoke-on-Trent, that David Cameron reminds me of my father. Both appear to suffer from a similar confusion about the way that the past connects to the present, both men imbuing the sensible with the same fixed meaning.

When we first got together, Tom asked me why I didn't drive. He loved being behind the wheel and had learnt the moment he turned seventeen. I told him it just wasn't my thing.

'Change was a weird thing for me when I was growing up. It was like something that wasn't allowed to happen.'

Tom's eyes were on the road. 'Isn't change the only certain thing?'

'I don't know.' Cows in a field and beyond them, a row of trees. 'That's what they say, but I think you have to know how to let it in. Also, if you make fake changes fast enough, you can avoid real ones.'

'What are fake changes?'

'I don't know. They look like changes, but aren't.'

'How do you know the difference?'

I shrugged. 'Hindsight.'

What kinds of things would he teach our kids? What would he consider useful? I try to teach myself useful things as I roam the warrens of Wikipedia. Windscreen

glass, for instance, is called sandwich glass. It is made from two layers of glass with a thin layer of vinyl sandwiched in between them for strength. This construction allows the glass to remain bonded even when shattered. In the event of breaking, all the bits are held in place by the interlayer, the polyvinyl butyral. Polyvinyl butyral, ethylene-vinyl acetate. It's good to have the names for things, to know what's materially possible.

When I get up on Sunday morning, Mum is at the dining-room table wearing headphones, a *Go Portuguese* textbook open next to her.

'Pode dizer-me o caminho mais rápido para a praia?'

This is new. My parents retired last year and they went on holiday to the Algarve to celebrate.

'Eu gostaria de ir nadar.'

I am standing in the doorway, the too-bright sunlight flooding in through the bay window, making the table's mahogany veneer shine.

'Gostaria de vir comigo?'

Mum turns and sees me. I used to think we could feel it when another person was looking at us because of our reptile brain. The bit in charge of feeding, fighting, fleeing and fucking; the survival instinct part that lets us know when a predator is watching. Mum widens her eyes and holds up a hand. She mimes listening while she listens, then presses stop.

'I didn't know you were there!' she shouts, then takes off the headphones and repeats herself in her normal voice.

'You're sounding good,' I tell her. She puts her notebook back inside the textbook to save the page.

'Oh, it's nonsense. All this to ask someone how to get to the beach and not be able to understand their answer.'

I've been reading about the brain. About how the old idea of a three-part structure – the primal reptilian part, the emotional mammalian part and the newer, smarter neo-cortex – is no longer considered correct. The idea, now, is that we can understand our brains by noticing our response if we take a sip of coffee when we are expecting tea. The argument is that our brains are *predictive engines*, always trying to guess what's coming next. We think we are seeing, but what we are actually doing is comparing: all incoming signals are held up against a vision that we have already made, a picture based on past experience.

Seeing Mum at the table doing her Portuguese makes me realise that I've never really seen her doing something like that before, something just for herself. She and Dad married young, found jobs, bought their house and had us. The main thing they seemed to want from us growing up was that we were good. To be good and to not make a fuss. I can remember, when I was around eight, asking Mum what being good *meant* – but she said not to ask such daft questions. When we went to mass on Sundays we wore something nice and Dad reminded us to thank God for making us so lucky.

On Saturday afternoon, I leave Tom watching the football with Dad while Mum and I go to the shops. I'm in a cubicle, trying on a shirt, when I get a call. I pick up my phone. The shirt is already making me sweat. It's an unknown number.

'Hello?'

'Hello, it's Kirsty here. I hear that you've been involved in a car accident that wasn't your fault. Is that right?'

I hang up and stare at myself in the garishly lit mirror. The loud pop remix pumping through the changing room seems to be speeding up. I put my own top back on and give the hangers of untried clothes back.

I find Mum by a display table of leggings. A woman beside the accessories rack is holding down a crying toddler, trying to strap him into his buggy. It's only ten o'clock but Primark is already busy.

We walk through the rows of clothes, stepping over things that have slipped onto the floor.

'Look at that! And only £3.99.'

Mum puts the pink top in her basket and we comb through the hangers, sometimes pulling something out and holding it up in front of ourselves. I pick up a short dress with a polka-dot print.

'That'd look good on you. You should get it.'

Again, this is new. We walk around a bit more and then make our way to the tills. As Mum hands over her card to pay for my dress, I realise she has put the pink top back.

These days, since she retired, Mum and I can almost talk of the past. Her waters broke early and without warning during the Falklands War. Identical twins, they told her; *The Sun* heralded our birth with the headline *GOTCHA*. Sometimes she says, If we did it again, I would do so many things differently. Usually I say that you can only know what you know when you know it, or that you did your best with the information you had.

Once I said: 'But, even now, with all we now know, *how* would we do it differently?'

Mum said: 'I'd make more time. More space. I'd make myself see.'

Time, space, mass and force. Perhaps, if we spin everything around fast enough in a Large Hadron Collider, we'll find out how it started.

I try to explain some things to Tom on the drive back home. It's hard. Sometimes it seems like he doesn't understand at all how our insides can be shaped and fixed by silent, invisible moments. He says I'm being vague; I try again:

'It's like it's only as you get older that you realise how much your insides, your *actual organs*, have been formed by all these tiny moments.'

'You're doing what your dad does.'

He steps so blithely into such dangerous territory. 'Meaning?'

'You're using *you* instead of *I*.'

It's true; when my dad describes things and how he feels about them, he uses the second-person pronoun in its plural form. Telling a story of someone who has upset him, he says, You feel awful, you feel like that's a real piss-take. It is a royal *you*. I don't know if it's an Irish thing, but it's a conversational stance that takes agreement and complicity for granted.

'Well, I do mean you plural,' I say. 'I mean *you* like *we*, like *we humans*. I mean that this is something that happens to all of us. It's only because you – singular – *like* the shapes that got made inside you that you don't notice it.'

He watches the road as he thinks. It is no longer raining. 'But what you're saying just sounds so passive. Don't we get to make ourselves?'

Tom's first gift to me was on his return from a work trip to Sri Lanka. It was a pink flower stuck to a piece of paper and pressed between the pages of a guidebook. Next to it was written the word *Shiva*.

For so long it had not been able to happen, and then it did. Sitting on my bed, he had handed me written confirmation of the first shibboleth, then an hour later, sweaty and hot-skinned beside me, he had whispered the second:

'You feel amazing.'

'Yeah? What do I feel like?'

His fingers stilled. 'You feel like – like a conker.'

I moved myself towards him, pushing his fingers further inside me.

'What does Shiva mean?' I'd asked him. I knew what Shiva meant.

'It's the god of destruction.'

'Why is the god of destruction part of my present?'

We were sitting on the bed. He told me that he had asked someone in a temple why there were so many shrines to the god of destruction. They had told him that there had to be destruction to make way for creation.

'And why the flower?'

'It was growing on a beach we visited. It was the beach where the Tamils were massacred at the end of the civil

war. It looked just like an ordinary beach, but then behind the sand dunes there was this trail of stuff. All these brightly coloured things. Clothes and bags and everything thrown on the ground.'

Tom only wore second-hand clothes, hand-me-down T-shirts and jumpers. He had an old stitch picker from his mother's sewing kit that he used to remove any logos and extraneous details from whatever he found in charity shops. For a bag he used an old bike pannier and his sunglasses had come free with a pack of razor refills. They had Gillette stamped along one of the arms.

'A prosthetic leg?'

'Yeah.' He lay back on the bed. 'It was on the sand with all the other stuff, pots and pans and flung-open suitcases. There was an official noticeboard with all this government information about the military victory and the end of the civil war, but the clothes hadn't even been cleared away.'

I lay back beside him, and after a while I asked how the word connected to the flower.

'I don't know – I thought you might.'

Later, I looked up the events on Mullaitivu beach. A trail of paraphernalia leading to a plaque telling you someone else's version of events. Two clicks and all the information, with pictures, is mine. Tens of thousands of Tamils were killed and the argument over the name for the anniversary of the massacre has gone on for years: Genocide Day, Commemoration Day, Celebration Day, Remembrance Day, Victory Day.

These unfamiliar facts have nowhere to rest but metaphor. What right have I to these fragments? Yet I add them to my swirling pile of grist. A twisted cardigan, a smashed TV set and a plastic shoe in the sand. Other people's stories and other people's pain: I pull them in and let them cluster, half understood, unacted-upon, yet now somehow mine.

A few days later, I'm cycling to work when my phone rings. I stop and shift onto the pavement. Another unknown number.

'Hello?'

'Are you driving?'

'What? Who is this?' My voice sounds loud and shrill on the empty street.

'Are you driving? I can't talk to you if you're driving.'

'I'm not driving. Why would I be driving? Who is this?' I can feel a panic rising in my chest. 'Who is this? I don't know who this is.'

'I'm calling because our records show that you have had an accident.'

The panic fades. 'What the fuck? This is some insurance company? Where are you getting my number from?'

'Our records show . . .'

I hang up and cycle on.

As I've said before, I don't drive. When people ask why not, I say things like, Have you seen me reading a map?! Have you seen how bad I am at maths?! This obviously doesn't explain anything, but the latent sexism signals the presence of a joke and steers the questioner elsewhere.

On my route to work, an old iron footbridge crosses the river. On it, someone had sprayed the words *Play Your Part* in bright pink. About a fortnight later, above it in thick permanent marker, someone else added *Feel Free Not To*. As I pass beneath it, I think of the house beside the harbour that I lived in when I was twenty-two, twenty-three. How one night, one of my flatmates called us over to the window to see a car roll into the water. By the time we'd run outside, the car had disappeared. We stood on the cobbles, asking each other what we should do.

'What if someone is trapped in there?'

'Can you see any movement?'

'We should jump in.'

James took off his jumper, Rob took off his shoes and I thought about how cold the water looked. We asked each other the same questions again:

'What if there's someone trapped inside?'

'There'd be movement, wouldn't there be movement?'

'Can you see anything?'

I think James called 999 in the end. The operator asked us if we saw anyone in the car. He told us someone would look into it, but not to worry; it was probably just joy riders dumping a stolen vehicle. That this kind of thing happens all the time. Eventually, we stopped staring at one another and down into the black water and went back inside. Every time I pass this bridge, I feel that moment. Looking into the water and at each other, all of us now knowing what we now know.