

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

A comet strikes the moon on our way to the pantomime, and nobody reacts.

My husband Ben goes on driving in his clunk-click, hard-by-the-rules way; our two children remain sprawled on the back seat, going about their business of dishing out dead legs and back-and-forth bickering as on any other drive.

Singular feeling, that: bearing witness alone to the end of the moon. A melting, meandering fireball of ice crept across my passenger-side window and ploughed with unimaginable force into its nearly-new face. Our little satellite wept flame, flared briefly as bright as the sun, then disappeared behind some wintergone trees.

I blink, sit up sharp. There's no new sound of calamity: just the car droning over tarmac as before, the heater set on four, some radio 4 show rounding up the year. Iris, behind me, hissing to my youngest Jack: *Do that again and I'll smash you, pizza-face*. Jack growling back: *Like ah'm bothered brace-face*. Ben telling the both of them to pack it in, then his hand on mine (he must've seen the impact too?) and a quick glance at me as he checks the mirror on my side.

'Everything okay?' he asks.

'Was I – did I say something?'

'You made a noise. You alright?'

I gawp out at the passenger-side sky. Over a frosty stubble-field the moon is there, back, doing its thing: tailing us, dodging clouds, counting its spots like my teenage son, suspended in place exactly as before.

I look to the windscreen and see at once my mistake: little rafts of sleet, melting, meandering, pushed and pulled along by the airflows outside.

Just sleet. Of course. That's all. The moon's unharmed.

I sink into my seat, close my eyes, wanting to put off any other mistruths the world will tell tonight.

We make the panto with ten minutes to spare. The kids look embarrassed by my infirmity, and to be honest, I'm doubting my own obstinate demands that they come along. I must be soft in the head. Morna, my old dear friend, laughed when I told her. 'You're not serious!' she said. 'Which one?' 'Aladdin,' I'd replied. 'Want to come?' 'Ha! You're pulling my leg! You're not serious!' 'I *am* serious. What's so damned funny about wanting, no, *needing* to have a little bit of fun?' Here her smile faded. 'You are serious,' she said. Then: 'Ignore me. Have a good time.'

So. A pantomime, because pantomimes are happy things, forget-yourself entertainment, and I could do with a little of that right now.

There's a service lift which gets us into the theatre, just large enough for Ben and me. He pulls me inside until the wheelchair sits snug against the grille doors. Honestly, I'm glad to be slipping past the box office and all those sympathetic titled heads. Ben, holding my bag, leans in over my right shoulder.

'Still keen?' he asks.

'Yes, yes,' I say, irritated by any hint of backtracking.

The lift jolts, rises a few feet – and then stalls. The lights flicker off, on, off.

Ben presses the first floor button: nothing. He presses again, then again. Nothing doing. No movement. He presses the red alarm button and I laugh, exasperated.

'Typical,' he says. He slaps the sheet metal wall.

'Looks like it's broken,' I say.

'Your luck is one of the wonders of this world.'

'Speak for yourself.'

Ben kneels down beside me, rubbing at his eyes. To keep me amused, I suppose, he morphs into his younger self. It's 1978. Summer loving. *Grease* at

the picturehouse, that hippy-coloured-ink-blobs screen before the film, blue loops of fag smoke rising along with lustful thinkings, dirty floors, tatty seats, screeching girls: me among them. Ben and I are punks, but we've forgotten to be snot-hurling and world-weary for the afternoon and instead we're just filmgoing teens. We're the twin rejects in a cross-eyed double-date. Our original date partners—loud and beautiful, you know the type—paired off quick together, then shrugged off going to the film with us. Last seen heading for the parklands beyond the high flats and an unwanted baby nine months later. Ben, beside me, is wearing faded denim, 24-hole Doc Martens, studded belt, spiked hair. (His Mohican is still a year off.) I'm in tie-dyes, leather snog-me skirt, 18-hole Docs, laddered tights. My foundation might be putty and coal dust, and maybe I fancy myself as a punk Cleopatra, but I look more like Francis Bacon's leering pope. Ben sticks his tongue in my ear. I tell him that this tickles my right bumcheek and he spits popcorn in mirth.

I try his ear, but the tickle is mine alone.

Afterwards we walk home, arms around each other's necks, stopping for brazen punk-snogs wherever there's a chance that someone might be there to see us. We both agree that the film was dire and that John Travolta was an utter arsehole, Olivia Newton-John pure cat's piss. In fact, the film was so bad we talk about it the whole way home... A safe distance from my street we stop to kiss in

a reeking underpass where I suppose my spots might be less obvious. I sit up on a zzzrrnnng-ing electricity box, away from the streetlamps, looking down on Ben, who looks up, his face hairless, his own angry rash of acne obvious, looks so young when I see him now—

older when I see him now. That young punk: now careworn, silver in his beard, his father's crow-lined eyes and hairline going the way of the glaciers. We're back in the lift.

'You were gone for a moment there,' he says. Then haltingly: 'You, eh, tried to stick your tongue into my ear.'

'Did I?'

'Yes. Yes you did.'

I don't like his disappointed, scared, tired face. 'Relax,' I say, patting the stubble-island of his forehead. 'A little ear-tonguing before the theatre never did anyone any harm.'

'You'll give me swimmer's ear.'

'Ach you never bothered about *that* when you were a punk.'

He's silent. Reaching in under my cardigan, he takes out my morphine pump.

'How much of this did you have in the car?'

I tell him not nearly enough. 'I felt all the bumps in the road. I think I hit it every three minutes, or as soon as the lock-out would allow. How? You think I've had too much? You think I need to go easier?'

'Maybe.' Ben looks away to the floor. 'No, of course, press it if you're sore. Don't worry about that. Don't worry about getting too much. Just as long as you're not in pain.'

I put the pump back in out of reach.

In my case, cancer has been about pain. My right breast and a job lot of lymph glands were removed five years ago. The cancer returned a year and a half later. A second round of chemotherapy dusted off the recurrence, but six months later this recurrence—well, recurred. I am now officially beyond remission—in the terminal lounge, so to speak. And I am in pain. Bad pain. Burning, burrowing, unmanageable pain. Let's call it *commanding*: a neat euphemism I learnt while on the oncology ward. This is pain light years beyond the nudges and scratches of a good punk-kicking; pain that has you wishing, pleading, praying, even as an atheist, for god.

My little pump keeps me sane. And insane, of course, depending on your viewpoint / bias. Before cancer I used to be scared of losing my mind; now cold sanity is the bogey man. After a minute or two at the surface I'm done, and ready

for reverie. Sometimes I get an odd notion of myself as human Morse Code: dots and dashes of real life with long gaps for nostalgia in-between. Sometimes it gets me the guilt: to be woolgathering while everyone else worries. The same guilt—and fear—that roots me in stopped horror in the supermarket, gawping at the sell-by dates: *will I be gone by then? I need to sleep less, live more. What about this date? Will I still be here? And then? And then?*

'Someone on the other side,' Ben's saying. 'We might catch the start yet.'

I swim back up to now. 'Where are our kids?'

'Waiting. I can hear Iris. She's asking if they couldn't just leave us be.'

'Very droll. A punitive slashing of her allowance, then.'

'Ten o'clock curfew.'

'Removal of sleepover privileges.'

'No art school for her.'

'Oh... wouldn't go as far as to say that.'

Iris, my bonny Iris, plans to follow in the footsteps of her mother. It's 1985. Glasgow School of Art. My spots have gone. I'm a self-styled Caledonian Dadaist, in thrall to Salvador Dali, doing for surrealism in Scotland what Hitler did for little square moustaches in Austria. I make kilts for dead rats; elegant evening dress for dogs; deface my own early watercolours with moustaches and pubic hair; beseech pigeons teetering on the sides of tall buildings with a loudhailer –

DON'T DO IT; draw a comic strip series where all the main characters turn into elephants, then eggs, then back to elephants, before someone thinks to say: 'Oh, screw this for a laugh.' And in the midst of all this self-indulgent creative hubris, I fall pregnant with Iris. My first lesson in real life art: there is nothing more surreal than trying to complete your final year thesis while vomiting twenty shades of green into a bucket. Now here am I, Ben's hand on my shoulder, his hand fine, young, slender. He's pulling my hair back out of the way as I throw up. I'm retching so hard, in fact, that I see stars. When I look up again, my forehead slick with sweat, there's a cup of sweet tea by my left hand.

And a ring.

Advice, ladies. Test your man. Vomit endlessly into a bucket, or trial a mysterious flu or five-day migraine which keeps you incapacitated in bed, then wait and see what he does. The good ones will be there to hold back your hair, wipe the sick from your mouth. The bad ones will make good their exit.

Ben cranes in, nearly falling into my lap. 'They're forcing the doors,' he says. 'Let me lie over you for a sec.' Sure enough, some sort of metal pole—a marlinspike, or is that the morphine talking again—is being forced between the lift doors above our heads. We're mid-floor—three feet of concrete, three feet of busy foyer. Not quite six feet under—an apt metaphor for my life! Above us, the box

office, two flustered ushers, our mortified kids, and horror of horrors—a crowd hanging back, greedily waiting to eyeball the sick lady in the chair.

'So much for slipping in past the box office,' I say.

A cheer goes up as I'm wheeled past the stage. I could do without Widow Twankey's not very subtle aside, 'Three cheers for our lady of the lift! Isn't she a brave sweetheart!', and the sentimental furore of clapping and foot-stomping that follows. Ben pushes me left of centre, where I huddle inside my jacket, sitting between our kids, staring at my knees. The panto goes on. I squirt morphine until the colours wash with the sound which washes with time. The stage and auditorium empty and it's just me, Jack, Iris.

My eyes slip shut and they turn toddler beside me. They're wearing pyjamas with blue stripes and pink butterflies: four and six, the bowl-cuts I gave them yesterday, Jack's gappy grin, Iris throttling her manky toy rabbit. I show them how to put a knitting needle through a balloon, how to yank a tablecloth leaving all the crockery in place (we fail.) Then we're on holiday in Wales and Jack is asking me, 'Are there spacemen in space, mummy?' to which I reply, 'Of course. Else how would we find them?' He puzzles over the false logic of this, then: 'Are you scared of ghosts, mummy?' And I answer: 'No, I'm more scared of there being *no* ghosts.'

It's only now that I understand what this means.

We retreat to the barn adjacent our holiday cottage, where I subject them to the long-winded ghost story which begins *It was a dark, dark night...*, while holding a torch, uplighting my face for sinister effect—

torch shining in my face. One of the usherettes is asking, 'You feeling alright, ma'am?' I scowl up at her. I mean, who calls anyone *ma'am* these days? I seem to have slumped a little. Ben says everything's fine, and rights me back in my chair. Iris, on my left, dabs at her eyes. 'Knew this was too much,' she says. 'You're exhausted. But you would insist.'

'I'm fine,' I snap. 'The goose is about to lay the golden egg. Leave me alone.'

There's a pause. Ben squeezes my arm. 'Wrong panto,' he whispers.

What will I become? Dust on a window ledge? A distracted moment on a vulnerable day? A saltwater memory, photos thumbbed and yellowed?

I believe in no god: so can only hope to persist in the minds of those I will leave behind. The occasional thought in my direction would be enough.

On the oncology ward all we talk of is hope. The living know nothing of this language: our terminal code. There are days where I wake up feeling optimistic—it still happens—and on those days I talk of a bridge to a bridge to a bridge. Perhaps the next treatment will take me up to the next breakthrough which will buy me six months, a year, two years, who knows. And then, in that future remove, things might be very different: gene therapy, nanotechnology, some miracle cure for all forms of cancer discovered in an as yet unshorn Amazonian glade: an über-cure, extracted, distilled, crystallised and available in pill form for me to take just in time for Jack's twenty-first birthday.

This is the way you get. This is what hope does. This is where *perhaps* and *maybe* and *who knows* gets you; to the edge of forever. But no further. This is my drop, my festering consciousness, my dance of death. This is hope.

Ben's hand on my shoulder. He's smiling, and so are the kids. It seems I've been screeching along with all the other children at the villains. Oh my. The auditorium crackling with applause. So I missed the end. Too bad. To be honest the costumes were a little disappointing this year: washed out sepia, the colour of old underpants. But maybe that's the morphine talking again.

I am back inside the car's bone-snug, air-con closeness.

On our return home I notice three things. One: Ben's hand drifting to mine as he says, 'I haven't enjoyed the theatre so much since we went to see *Grease* together. Do you remember? That was a good film. You cried at the end. And the middle. And the beginning. You were the soppiest punk in the world as I recall.'

I categorically reject this version of events.

Two. Our children behind us going on about Christmas like it's not some doomed pageant or Shakespearean tragedy, but an event to be enjoyed.

Three. Our little satellite moon, surviving another cometary collision. At the last I move my head and the colliding fireball of ice veers from its path, melting on harmlessly.

I'll leave off the pump for a while longer.