

ON THE WAY TO THE CHURCH

They had driven to Wales from London late the night before. Even before they set out they were exhausted. All the way through the business of leaving their house – locking windows, switching off lights, carrying the bags and the howling baby out to the car – they had argued, bitterly, furiously, until they lost all notion of what it was they wanted from one another and only a sense of miserable, injured, short-changed grievance remained. Most of the five-hour drive passed in silence.

The weather seemed to pick up their mood and magnify it. Rain battered the windscreen. Gusts of wind shook the car. Sarah was afraid they would overturn and be thrown into the whirling, sticky blackness. The usual signs flashed by: Hungerford, Maidenhead, Bristol, Cardiff. Hard to believe such places still existed when they were in the middle of such darkness. For long stretches there were no lights along the motorway and then it felt as if the road itself had been abolished. They could have been driving under the sea or stalled, just a set of headlights drilling into oblivion. And through it all the poor baby slept in his cot on the backseat, unaware that his world was coming undone.

Now and then the car wavered in its lane. Sarah felt John's strength falter and she understood the effort it took to keep the three of them on this road. She wondered, not for the first time, whether this was the cost of her choice. She was forty-three and he fifty – far too old to be having babies.

People found it bizarre that they should become parents now, after fifteen years of marriage. Why wait so long? they'd say, or: whatever for? – depending on their attitude to children. 'It was an accident,' she'd say. 'We thought we couldn't.'

Most people laughed at that but some looked disappointed, as if they wished she'd invented a prettier story. Still, it was the truth.

By the time they reached his mother's place it was one in the morning and the town was shuttered up for sleep, with only a few late-night stragglers stumbling home. Ann was at the door as soon as she heard their car, greedy arms outstretched.

Sarah and John put on a show of being on speaking terms, but Ann wasn't interested in them. 'Give him to me,' she crooned. 'The babe, the babe. Let me hold him. Come to me, my precious.'

The next day was freezing but bright, rinsed clean by the storm. To Sarah's relief, her mother-in-law set out early with one of the neighbours to be sure of getting good seats in church. Sarah and John got ready in silence. When it was time to leave the house John went ahead without a backward glance, leaving Sarah to follow with the pram. There was no traffic so they walked in the middle of the road. Fifteen years. His face was so familiar to her that she could hardly even see him, and yet lately he'd become a stranger.

She had given up her job when she discovered she was pregnant. She wanted to spend the first year with the child and they could manage on one salary for a while, but at times like this she felt she'd made a terrible mistake. She had made herself dependent just as John became undependable. She had fallen off the map. There were moments of great joy, but she was always responding, always governed by the machine-gun tattoo of the child's needs or John's moods, supplying whatever seemed to be required. Now. Now. Now. Some days she felt that 'accident' was the most accurate description of what had happened to them and that everything she'd ever known and valued had been consumed in the wreckage.

A pigeon flapped by overhead and the baby gave a wordless exclamation of pleasure. That was new. She smiled down at him, admiring the curve of his head, the kiss-curl on his

brow, those fat, perfect little hands fiddling with the tassels of his blanket. Who will he become, she wondered? I wish he could tell me.

She leaned in to straighten the neck of his christening gown. He caught a hank of her hair and tugged it like a bell-pull. She laughed. The feeling of dread inside her lifted a little. It was 9.15 a.m. They had fifteen minutes before the start of the service.

She walked on.

Each street was much like the next, rows of two-up, two-down houses, mostly pebble-dashed and double-glazed. Outside Mitzi's Hair Salon John had paused, waiting for her to catch up, though he still kept his back turned. An elderly man with a terrier stopped to talk to him. Sarah slowed her pace, hoping that the man would be gone before she got there. She wasn't in the mood for small talk.

But John turned and beckoned to her, beaming, as if no cross word had ever passed between them. 'Sarah, come and say hullo. This is Rhydian. Rhydian, this is my wife. And this ...' John looked down at the pram with a faintly surprised expression. '...this is my son.'

They all stood and gazed at the child. How could such a gleaming creature have sprung from two such worn and bitter bodies?

'I've known Rhydian all my life,' John said. 'I remember during the miners' strike, we'd be out in front of Woolworths collecting for them. Isn't that right, Rhydian?'

'Aye.' The old man nodded.

'That's, what, twenty years ago, now?'

'Thirty, more like,' said Rhydian, wheezing. 'You were still a bit wet behind the ears back then.'

John shook his head. 'Terrible. All those pits closed in the end, just like we said.'

'Aye,' said Rhydian. 'And Woolworths.'

The baby had begun to fuss and wriggle under his blankets.

'We need to get a move on, John,' Sarah whispered. To Rhydian she explained that Ann was keeping seats for them in the church. She nodded down at the child. 'He's being christened today.'

'Mustn't keep you, then,' said Rhydian, patting John on one shoulder. 'Give my best to your mother.'

They walked on. Soon the high street was in view. Groups of mostly elderly people in their best clothes were making their way up the hill towards the church. But John was looking in the opposite direction, down a side road.

'When I was ten I fell off my bike over there,' he said. 'Skinned my leg all the way from the ankle to the knee. And down this road, when I was older, sixteen or seventeen, I remember I persuaded this boy to let me try his motorbike. But he didn't tell me how to stop. I had to crash into a wall.' The meeting with Rhydian seemed to have tipped him back into the past. 'When I went up to the grammar school, I used to travel with a boy who lived on the left, there, Gareth Mason.'

Sarah chewed her thumbnail. Somehow she had to get him to hurry up without triggering a row. Ann would be counting the seconds by now, eyes fixed on the door at the back of the church.

'Gareth Mason, eh?' She forced a smile.

'Yes, he lived along there at number twelve. He was abroad for years, working for one of the big oil companies, but he's been ill. My mother was telling me he's moved back home to recuperate.'

Sarah kept the smile going, though on the inside she was raging: that she should be forced to behave like an air hostess with her own husband, and worst of all, that John seemed to prefer this fake, grinning persona to her real self.

‘Tell you what,’ he was saying, ‘I’m just going to knock the door and see if Gareth’s there. Just a quick hullo. We’ve got plenty of time.’ He took the pram away from her and set off down the side street. Sarah followed, the soles of her good shoes slapping on the tarmac. What will we do after today, she wondered? The road keeps running into sand.

A gaunt-looking man answered the door. There was laughter and back-slapping, then to Sarah’s dismay the two of them began to pull the pram into the house. Had John lost his mind? The service was about to begin. They had seven minutes to get to the church.

‘A baby, eh?’ said Gareth Mason, looking everywhere but at the child. He showed them into a warm, cluttered sitting room where a game of football played silently on TV. ‘I’ll make some tea, shall I?’ He left the room.

‘We don’t have time for this!’ Sarah hissed. She yanked the pram handles in her temper so that the baby gave a soft cry of protest.

John didn’t seem to hear. He was kneeling on the floor, looking through Gareth Mason’s vinyl collection, murmuring with pleasure at various albums he recognized.

Gareth came back and leaned in the doorway while he waited for the kettle to boil. ‘They were up in the loft for years,’ he said, nodding at the stack of albums. ‘Mam never throws anything out.’

John pulled out a David Bowie album. ‘Unbelievable, isn’t it, to think he’s gone?’

‘Shocking,’ said Gareth.

‘He always looked so alive. So indestructible. Though mind you, he had a heart attack in the noughties, didn’t he? He nearly died on stage.’

John began to read through the song titles under his breath. ‘Changes. That’s him in a nutshell, isn’t it? He reinvented himself so many times. So many lives he lived.’

Gareth opened his mouth to say something, but the kettle whistled in the kitchen. He went out.

Sarah was lurching between panic and a white-hot fury. She began to turn the pram around towards the hall. ‘John, your mother is sitting there in front of the whole congregation waiting for us. We have to go right NOW or we’ll miss the start and she will never, ever forgive us.’

John had pulled another record from its sleeve and was running one finger lightly around the outer rim.

‘Did you hear me, John?’

‘Let’s not rush,’ he murmured. ‘It’s just a normal church service to begin with. The christening bit isn’t till the very end.’ And then, almost inaudibly, ‘There’s something I need to tell you.’

‘Oh.’ She let her hands slip away from the pram. ‘Right now?’

‘There’s never a good time, is there?’

A chill spread through her. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. He’s off. He’s met someone who isn’t constantly covered in baby sick, someone who finishes their sentences, who isn’t always too tired for sex. She took a few faltering steps into the centre of the room, then retreated to the sofa so that when it came – the end of the road – she wouldn’t have too far to fall.

‘Go on.’

In the kitchen they could hear the ring of a spoon on china. Something metallic fell with a crash.

John put the record away. ‘So,’ he said. He scrubbed his mouth with the back of one hand. ‘You remember I had that hospital appointment last year about the deafness on my right side? Remember? And I never heard back from them so I assumed ...’

This was not what she’d been expecting. Not at all.

John was still speaking. He was using words like: ‘scan’ and ‘tumour’. Sarah wanted to respond but all she could manage was a strangled noise at the back of her throat.

‘They put the result in the wrong pile, apparently, or they misfiled it, or lost it. Something. They should have called me in sooner,’ he said. ‘But anyway, they’re on the case now. And it’s not too late. It’s a slow-growing one, apparently. So they’re going to open up just here.’ He indicated a place behind his ear. ‘And whip it out.’

Sarah sank backwards into the sofa. Motes of dust tumbled in the stream of winter sunlight from the window behind her. She felt she might never get up again.

John came and sat beside her. ‘You mustn’t worry, Sarah.’ He took her hand. ‘The surgeon does these operations all the time. I googled him. He’s world class.’ He laughed. ‘Funny, isn’t it? All that time when you were pregnant, I was growing a tumour. Like a competition.’

She turned to him in a daze. How long is it, she wondered, since I’ve heard him laugh?

Gareth Mason came in clutching three mugs in his trembling, skeletal hands. ‘I put milk in all of them,’ he said. ‘I wasn’t sure.’

‘Good man.’ John’s face was open and relaxed. You could see what he must have been like, Sarah thought, when he and Gareth Mason used to be friends.

Gareth gave Sarah her tea, then went over to the stack of records and fished out a cinnamon-coloured album. ‘Remember this one, John? 1977, *Low*. Let me play you my favourite track.’ He bent down and fiddled with the stereo.

‘It’ll be all right, Sarah,’ John whispered. ‘I promise.’ And then, ‘Sorry about the things I said last night. I didn’t really mean any of it.’

‘I love this one,’ said Gareth, dropping the needle onto the disc.

There was a brief crackle like bacon in a pan, then David Bowie began to sing ‘Always Crashing in the Same Car’. Gareth Mason hummed along and John drank his tea and the baby rubbed his ear and grew sweaty and fell asleep. And Sarah closed her eyes and went hurtling into the welter of possibilities ahead, hoping that John would be right, that they would be lucky – luckier than the miners, luckier than Woolworths, luckier, even, than David Bowie with all his many, many lives.

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