

TIGHT
Taken from
RESIDUE

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TIGHT

The little things.

Your red-striped white tracksuit top which I abhorred now hangs disconsolately in the cupboard under the stairs.

The sound of rain has lost its warmth and hint of fun.

Photographs belong to the past rather than a reflective future.

Linear time is tripped and perpetuates U-turns into infinity.

1. DISINTEGRATION

Tom Waits on the CD player. Isobel arguing over the merits of pseudo-sotted songwriting with Graham, a pseudo-friend who dropped round for a genuine cup of coffee. I sit watching them both. Wound up inside knowing that unless we tell Graham to piss off home it will be hours yet before Isobel's functional hospitality runs her as ragged as me. Her hair is shoulder-length and curls up affectionately around her ears. I have yet to detest the gleaming white stud in her nose. The curtains are drawn and they keep the warmth of the rain away from the heat in the room. I guess it makes a difference that Isobel is teetotal.

Inside Isobel's stomach our baby is growing, hidden yet obvious. Her skin as taut as a drum's, and when we make love it is as carefully as two teenagers whose parents are chatting in the next room about their prospects at university.

'Bloody hell, Graham,' I find myself saying. Then I stop as he looks at me, his eyes affecting a quizzical look, totally unaware how much I need him out of here.

'What?'

I shake my head.

In bed I pass the flat of my right hand over Isobel's stomach. I can feel the sudden burr of a limb. She looks at me knowingly, and we both smile, kiss. She tastes the same way she has done for four years. A soft, yielding, truly wonderful and unimpeachable human being. I ruffle her hair, then return my hand to her stomach. Bend my head so that the lobe of my right ear touches her skin. Listen.

'Graham's a prick, isn't he?' I say suddenly.

I can feel her smile, gentle and unassuming.

'Isn't he?'

'He's your friend,' she says. 'Isn't he?'

'He isn't!'

I turn my head to look at her for a moment. She is still smiling. The delicate light from the bedside lamp fingers her hair, temporarily blinding her. When I look into it directly it blinds me. I blink and rub my eyes.

'Tired?'

'Not yet.'

Years later I wake in bed in my parents' house. Chicken come home to roost. Outside it's fatally dark and my daughter lies beside me, her breathing quiet, alive. We're alone.

The only other sound is also rhythmic. I listen intently. It appears close and distant simultaneously. Without question I realise it must be the sound of shears cutting the lawn. Yet it's past midnight. I listen and listen, as though it were possible to listen harder when the night is so quiet. Eventually perspective shifts. The sound is the unfamiliar ticking of a plastic alarm clock close to my head. I sleep again, dream inconsequentially.

Isobel is looking directly at me. I can feel the tears at the back of my eyes and can see the tears at the back of hers. Fuck. How the hell did this ever happen?

'Fuck me.'

She whispers it early morning, the first rays of the sun barely at house height. I wake immediately, although I always do. Without my knowing she has already hardened me, and it takes but a few seconds for her to climb onto me and smile.

Without the condom she feels hyper-real, undesensitised. I remember pushing my cock into a tin of *Tate & Lyle's* treacle when I was fourteen years old and wondering if that was what it felt like. It doesn't. It cannot because the tin doesn't respond, and it's in response that making love really makes love.

When I come early she clings onto me desperately, and I sweat hoping she's there too. She is. Time's co-ordinates shift imperceptibly. Our baby is on the way.

For her thirtieth birthday Isobel sports a black velvet bulge in her tummy and walks through the party looking less like herself and more like a pregnant woman. I am watching from the other side of the room. A glass almost at my lips, so close I can smell the wine. For the first time I see her for what she is. Public property.

But the moment passes.

Anita Lane is on the CD player. In a voice as rich as dark chocolate she sings, 'I think that I'll just make love to the next man that I see.'

Is that what she's doing now? Is that what Isobel is doing now?
Is it?

Becoming a writer, writing a novel: these are physical as well as mental transformations. Ideas spool. Isobel understood that.

I slip my hands around her waist as she stands by the washing machine looking out through the kitchen window. I follow her gaze but I can't see what it is that she is seeing. I gently caress the skin surrounding our baby. My head bends to kiss the back of her neck. Isobel is strangely unaffected.

Suddenly she says: 'It doesn't matter does it?'

'What doesn't matter?'

I refuse to pull away and look at her eyes.

'Whether it's a boy or a girl. It doesn't matter does it?'

I bury my face into her shoulders, my answer becomes muffled.
'Does it?'

Time spent away from each other was always constructive. Even now the house contains most of her paintings. All self-portraits,

and, in a way which I am only beginning to understand, all landscapes.

A child dissipates time to such an extent that one struggles to retain an identity.

That's my excuse.

Egypt was our first trip together. Not much of it remains in the present. I know we spent equal time gazing into the mask of Tutankhamun as we had been gazing into each other's souls. Struck also by the mummified body of King Ramses II, tiny and fragile, in sharp contrast to the magnificent statues flanking temples impossibly high. The hubbub of the markets also returns...

'Hello, hello, hello.'

'You walk like an Egyptian.'

'Where you from? Where you staying?'

'Lovely jubbly. Asda price.'

We followed our instinct and trusted a boy who arranged to meet with us in the evening for a beer. His eyes were dark and expressive. Following him to the Madrassa of Al-Ghourri in Islamic Cairo we joined a surprising number of similarly led tourists, hastily seated for the free display of *raqs ash-sharqi*.

I held Isobel's hand for the two hours or more that time suspended itself, almost as if to let go would draw me into the centrifugal force of the whirling dervishes. Ostensibly a mystical, religious dance the music sounded at times like skewed jazz. The trumpeter had an incredible, otherworldly range. Just when the music seemed about to climax, they played faster... then faster again. A solo trumpeter spotlight was followed by a solo hand cymbalist and drummer.

When the dancers appeared the stakes were raised. Accompanied by an intense cacophony of mesmerising music a man spun on the spot for over twenty minutes, looping layered skirts up and over his head in perpetuity. Isobel was transfixed. I kept stealing glances her way. She was too engrossed to smile at me. We left dizzy.

In retrospect it's easy to point the finger at where relationships deteriorate. But then again, it's also impossible to be honest. Understanding is cumulative.

Isobel.

Bella.

Lauren.

At a writer's convention two years after Bella's birth Lauren placed her hand on mine and said: 'I love your work.'

Really, it was no more than that. I would never, ever have approached anyone with a name like that.

Again, excuses always follow the event.

Yet I did write her name in snow piled inch-thick on Bishopgate bridge.

The little things set off against each other, bounce coincidence until, squash-ball like, even the hardest truths set in stone, become pliable, flexible, free.

Iggy Pop's *Avenue B* on the CD player. I felt the luxury of her.

2. INTEGRATION

Lauren calls me up and asks how I am.

'Fine.'

'You don't sound fine.'

'So how do I sound?'

There is a pause.

'Aggravated.'

Fucking aggravated. Did she just choose that as a word to please her presumed mentor? Yet suddenly I slip into her mode, reveal myself once again just that tad too much, and I'm hers.

When she talks of her ex-husband I realise I'm hoping I never have to meet him. Culturally bereft; a bruiser. Lauren's voice is like cream dripping into my ear as she simultaneously licks it out again. Something pulls inside me. Tight. I realise I'm not listening to her words, but to her sound. Sonically she is amazing. Even in bed. Attuned to her I become passive.

Isobel has gone.

She was calm for the most part. Only once did she pick whatever it was nearest to hand and almost, almost fling it in my direction. The final release being too much, as if the physical act would acknowledge the pain she was feeling, would confirm it, would clarify that the whole fucking mess wasn't part of some

hurtful, stupid dream. It was only afterwards that I realised it was one of Bella's toys.

It all came unstuck precisely when we were the happiest. We trusted each other, were supremely and unconquerably in love, and we dropped our guard.

Bjork in my tender ears. *Cocoon* from *Vespertine*. The deliberate static confusing my CD player, reminiscent of older times. I saw her once as a Sugarcube. A wound-up toy oscillating across the stage. This song doesn't remind me of Isobel, but of Lauren. Waiting for her to emerge and demonstrate her true colours. Waiting for her to flower, to blossom, to palpably demonstrate her feelings. And then when they came I was so unprepared to wallow in her.

'You may take me now.'

But where?

Ideas condense. Kissing Bella that morning, and then perfunctorily grazing Isobel's cheek with cold lips. Expectation tight inside me, yet also free: a form of release; subconsciously letting go in such a way that makes it easy in retrospect. But which doesn't justify it. Could never have done. Those emails which I could have deleted but didn't. Safety in numbers. Lost.

Bella's outstretched arm in the bed reaches towards me, hand splayed. So soft and warm. I kiss her fingertips, then finger away the tips of tears at the corners of my own eyes. Can feelings of hate be as irreversible as those of love? I mouth Isobel's name. Even the clock seems to have become silent.

The train, the passengers, the wild landscape. Such a writer's fascination created for indulgence. Unsatisfactory existence. The deliberate undermining of my own happiness. What nags is whether Lauren was ever more than a catalyst. Was I really simply an evolved being and no more? Is that all there is to life?

Isobel fighting back tears...

...of anger...

...of disbelief...

...of betrayal...

...of truth.

When Lauren laughs the simple clarity of her voice dispels my

sanity. I hug her. Marshmallow seeps into my core. I bend my head to kiss her neck. Her head tips back, eyes heavenwards. Old artex on the ceiling. My ceiling. Someone else's paintwork. Isobel's house.

Her fingers interlock with mine. Falling back onto the bed I am trapped. I join her. Trace a curl of hair away from her face. Kiss her without guilt as though my other self is but a doppelganger, a traitor in a parallel existence with someone else's wife and child. My hands ride up her dress. Her thighs softly part. She responds to me. We control each other.

We fuck.

Was it ever that easy.

I once took Lauren on a speculative location sortie for a movie which was funded but never made. *Barcelona Nights*. All expenses paid. Our days were spent with Gaudi, our evenings replicating the twists and turns of his imagination in the architecture of our bed.

I was at the peak of my literary career. Lauren basked at my side. Her underwear shone bright yellow in my face every morning as she slipped it over herself after coming out of the shower. I had a recurring dream where I swallowed a warm glowing light, and woke up to find Lauren's hand over my heart.

Isobel had known by then. We'd had our fight. She'd left. Bella cried without understanding. Lauren smiled with the curled mouth of satisfaction. Those were the clues.

Sometimes perfection isn't enough. It forces you to find imperfections which you inherently believe lie within it. Whereas with imperfection, you are drawn to find perfection there.

Lauren knew this.

I wrote her name in the snow, goddammit.

3. REINTEGRATION

There is a small collection of raised lumps at my elbow which irritate whenever I lie on the floor, looking at you.

Pinpricks of light penetrate through the curtains where moths have dined.

Bella takes my hand and says *do this* and *do that daddy*. I do it. Her toys have a greater life than their own. She bestows gifts on them.

The phone rings and it is Graham.

'Fuck off,' I say.

Bella looks quizzical.

'There is something you should know,' he says.

Something inside wills me not to listen. But then again, I do.

In the background I can hear Blur on his CD player. *Tender*. 'Oh my baby, oh my baby, oh why, oh my'. But no, that's in my head isn't it?

I really do not know much anymore.

Isobel cries when she sees Bella again. A year has passed and much has changed. Bella knows her, but she doesn't cry. She is happy though. Internally so. My own guts are wrenched. I know that Bella's life will only be full if Isobel and I find peace together. I want everything simultaneously.

Lauren may as well have disappeared into thin air. She only left behind Isobel's hole. Once, walking back from the park, whilst Isobel and I were together, I had seen the words *L was here* written in thick black marker on a street sign. Are there such things as portents? Did I really believe so at the time, or are my excuses enfeebled attempts to rationalise lunacy?

Are such things there to be known?

Are they?

When Isobel's eyes look at me again they are wet with tears. I wait for a sign as to whether they are for the past or the future. Graham stands to one side, almost out of my vision, in the doorway. I still don't know whether he rang of his own accord, whether he loves Isobel; platonically or sexually. Or how long she has been here. Or where she has been for the past twelve months for that matter.

Once, Graham was a little boy. As young as Bella. He probably had a train set one Christmas which never got a great deal of attention other than being set up and then put away again, with a few simulated Paddington Rail crashes in-between. His parents stayed together through thick and thin, they ignored his association with soft drugs. He wore glasses, then contact lenses. Occasionally got laid. Attended a fledging writer's group which also had me as a member before I split away like a phoenix from the ashes, or a

lyrebird. If he hadn't called himself my friend, despite all my remonstrations to the contrary, despite my determined efforts to rid his incessant approaches into my life, then would Isobel be here now?

None of us in the room can answer that, but only I am asking.

I take Bella out of the room and put her in the car. She's happy enough.

Isobel comes to me as the dying reverberations of a crashed cymbal. She wants me. She wants to be. She tries to touch my face. She smiles again. I could be in an echo chamber for all my understanding. Recently, there has been Beatrice.

And Rona.

And Claudette.

And Cheryl.

Nothing consummated.

Nothing gained.

I detest the silver stud in Isobel's nose.

Bella looks up at me, expectant. *Daddy*.

Lauren's name is carved deep in the stonework on Bishopgate bridge.

Eventually, everything collects moss; one of the first plants to colonise new land.

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