

### **Thursday, 1:14 am**

Another sleepless night. Technically, morning. A Thursday, I think.

Teddy, full of wriggle and fidget. I stroke his face (slightly flushed), his jaw, apply deep pressure to his elbows and knees, trying to stir them, remove the blindfolds from his sluggish neurons and proprioceptors. Only when his body wakes up can it remember how to relax, register its need for rest. I know how it is meant to be done, how it is meant to work. But tonight, both the theory and its practitioner are failing badly. Teddy's body is lost, and I cannot marshal it home. All I unshutter is a romping hilarity – convulsant laughter, hiccups nerve-deep flipping him inside out. And before long Teddy is out of bed, a spark pogoing from one impulse to the next – the piano, the computer, book corner, the bathtub-cum-ball pit, the front porch hammock. Me a creak in his wake, begging quiet.

### **2:02 am**

Plan B: a decampment to the downstairs laundry.

Narrow and windowless, black as tar after sunset. Arctic air conditioning.

A salt lamp offers us a milky mauve welcome and the rack of drying laundry pastels the air, blossomy and biscuit-sweet. Teddy, a thin dart, aims himself at our makeshift bed – a downy bolthole on the floor slotted below an old desk. At the urging of a sleep specialist, a storyboard of Teddy's 'ideal bedtime routine' was once velcroed to its underside:

brush teeth 😊 → into bed 🛏 → story time 📖 → sleepy rub 🧘 →  
kiss kiss 😘 → night light 🌙 → sleep tight 🌙  
HAPPY MORNING FACES! 😊 🧘

And, as urged, Teddy would point to each picture in the sequence as though ticking off the steps, my job to nod with enthusiasm. Our ritual of faith.

None of it did a jot for Teddy's sleep. 'Zero jots,' as Frank would say. We replaced the storyboard long ago with pictures of meerkats and miniature donkeys, the 2000 Essendon dream team. Also worth zero jots in terms of a sleep dividend, but better to snug up in happy cheer than be stared down by dud allied-health alchemy. Awake either way.

Almost bespoke, our Plan B bower is tailored to Teddy's needs: ordered, unchanging, close. It is our last-chance saloon – our final hope of resetting the night's clock. If sleep doesn't find us here, it doesn't find us at all.

It was by accident, so often the way, that we discovered the witching of the washing machine – its operatic, soothing predictability. The filling tub – a trickling overture. The to-ing and fro-ing recitatives of the wash cycle – *swish-a slosh, swish-a slosh*. The crescendo whir of its finale. Cradlesong, for Teddy at least. Before commando-crawling in beside him, I sacrifice a basket of frowzy bath towels to the machine's paddled maw – an offering to our personal god of sleep.

In the pale-lilac glow, Teddy's fingers skim my face, barely there taps across my nose, my cheeks. He is counting my freckles and I have no doubt he will calculate their precise number. As he does this, he lies listening to his pillow, its covert life. A warble of feathers under his head? The stretch and yawn of the freshly washed cotton slip, its breath raincloud-clean? Microbial cooties? I drag a summer blanket up to his chest. The back of his hand circles lightly over the

fabric's weave – four circles, ten circles, minutes of circles, his head tilted, his ear, tuning. The blanket itself may not be the thing, the stimming circles merely a grounding, enabling focus, a shift closer to whatever it is he hears – signals, transmissions, a rock's slow rusting, the travails of a worm – for it will be something, far from here yet far from silent.

Could it be that those restless feathers tickle up this: a ripple that soon becomes a king tide?

Feathers ... birds ducks geese ... two legs that paddle two legs that swim ... swimming ... beach trip car—

no legs on a car ... tyres on a car ... black tyres black car black seat black dog black—

dogs bark don't quack ... bark on a dog bark on a tree ... tree timber wood—

wood this desk ... four legs this desk four legs like a dog not like a dog—

second-hand this desk

not seconds on a clock

second-hand (why hands?) ... no hands on a desk no hands on a duck no hands on a goose ...

And on it goes, a rocket ride in seconds as the rest of us plod on. A rocket ride of roundabouts and ring roads, intersections, flyovers, curlicues of hyperconnections swerving beyond his control. Possibly sublime, possibly maddening.

Then again, it may be nothing like this at all.

For here's what I know (but can never hope to understand) about Teddy: everything is somehow connected, everything a purposeful fit. Nothing is ever nothing.

Also this: the spike of an old-style fluorescent tube makes him flinch as through struck, flee the room, shielding his ears – hence our predilection for lamplight. He *feels* light as surely as he does the growth of his hair, scissors an insult to each and every strand,

haircuts long abandoned. The colour yellow possesses terrors that turn him to stone. Despite never speaking, not a single word in fifteen years, Teddy can sing like an angel, in Latin, Italian, French, for precisely sixty seconds. And he's yet to meet a stranger whose birthday month he can't predict. Anyone, anywhere. A perfect score.

And here's what I *think* I know about Teddy: unmapped terrain is his surest footing – hearing the unvoiced, seeing the just-beyond, drawn always to the underside of the leaf than to the fanfare of the bloom. There is more than just us in this room, in this world, more than what we know and transact and applaud. A world more beaten track and borderland to Teddy than paved lanes and centred lines. A *more-than* beyond the grapplings of most. But the shy lodgers with their dark-corner dialects, Teddy observes them all, observes them best. Out of the shadows come the rumoured and the remnant, their hands held out, palms open, inviting him into a wayside world that Teddy, willingly or not, seems to be part of.

Who could blame him for not wanting to sleep through all that – an endless carnival of discovery? But what a weight of care and affection. How exhausting.

Teddy reaches out, picks up my hand. We lace our fingers. He squeezes, I squeeze, back and forth we go. This takes as long as it takes, until my turn goes unanswered, and he sleeps.

## **2:54 am**

Some people count backwards when they can't sleep. Instead, I do this:

*Canada – population thirty-five million, capital Ottawa, coldest recorded temperature -63.0°C, Yukon, 1947.*

*Iceland – population three hundred and seventy-one thousand, capital Reykjavík, coldest recorded temperature -38.0°C, 1918.*

It started when I was a child. The five coldest countries, then

ten, then twenty. Though I refresh population statistics with every census, I ran out of countries long ago. I include cold cities now. Hot places are forever ineligible.

And now my mind travels through time, as minds in the dark often do, to nights of another life.

And to last night. *Dimension Unknown*, season finale. Frank's favourite show.

Frank: 'Most other pare ... most other pare ... most other parents make their k- ... make their k- ... make their ... *KIDS* watch ... watch the news. But we never wa- ... we never do.'

'No, darling, we don't.'

'I'm gl- ... I'm gl- ... I'm gl-*GLAD* you're not like most parents, Mum.'

'I'm glad you're not like most kids, Franko.'

Our hero, Commander Noah Hay, wrestling an ailing shuttle, low fuel, oxygen fast running out. *Do you read? Do you read, over?* Tense music swells.

Frank leaning across, whispering, 'If I was a magish- ... magish- ... magician, Mummy, I'd ... I'd make ... I'd make ... I'd make C- ... I'd make C- ... *COMMANDER* ... I'd make Commander Hay marry you.'

Frank, make-believing (for his sake or for mine?) that I'm not still technically married to his father. To Jerrik, who may be sleeping upstairs in his suite or, more likely, who may be sleeping with Cassie or Mia or Yumi.

'Sweet,' I tell him. 'However ... *Jay Hay?*'

'Hey ... Hey ... Hey Jay.' Frank chuckles. 'Hey, Jay Hay.'

'Hey, Frank Hay.'

When we stop laughing, Frank says that if he were a magician, he'd make Commander Noah Hay come around and hold my hand whenever I get sad.

'Not the c- ... not the c- ... not the ... *CHARACTER*. The

actor. I kn-know ... I kn-know ... We all know how much you like him. Almost as much as Daniel Craig.'

'What a lovely thought,' I say.

### **3:10 am**

Teddy in deep sleep. I curl and shift around him (his body a little warmer than I think it should be), trying to ease the ache in my hip, recalling the many attempts to set him up in his own room like his brother. Losing sleep so as to devour books on sleep, on the evils of bed-sharing. The popular parenting paradigms just couldn't be made to fit. Nor will the 'family life cycle theory' – the idea of a family as a system moving through time. Stage 1: single young adult, living independently. I got to Stage 1, somehow. For Jerrik, no stage exists beyond it. Much of what I do aims to put Stage 1 within Frank's reach, to have him grow some feathers, ready him for short-burst flights from the nest. He may or may not get there. But there is no cycle theory for Teddy and me, so we have fashioned our own. Single-phase. And this is it.

*Russia – population one hundred and forty-six million, capital Moscow, coldest recorded temperature -67.7°C, Oymyakon, 1933.*

It isn't a nervous tic. Not an obsessive-compulsive ritual though, if it were, I wouldn't fight it because these are also facts. No-one could deny them, not even my mother, who to this day denies everything. No claiming, *There's no such place, Jay*. All in your head, those three-point-three-million wind-chapped Mongolians. Havens of frost, blizzarding and creaturely, cold enough to ice over hell and all its spiv spruikers. Ghosts self-destruct in snow. Mine would, at least.

*Scotland – population five point three million, capital Edinburgh, coldest recorded temperature -27.2°C, Aberdeenshire, 1895/1982, and Altnaharra, 1995.*

No more ridiculous than counting sheep.

Teddy's chest rising and falling. The Whirlpool muscling through the rinse cycle.

Cradlesong for Teddy.

Agitato for me.

Not just her voice now, the lady herself. My mother, Lenore, though none ever called her that. She was Lonnie, Cyclone Lonnie, and here she is centrestage, her natural place, the corner of my eye (Keep, you bastard) as brightly lit as a stadium.

I am eight when she brings home our tea.

And I am twelve as she throws it onto the kitchen table.

Seven and ten and fourteen I am, when she tears open the Charcoal Charlie's silver bag, shredding its jolly comic-book flames, its conga line of jubilant hens. Our *tea*; never our dinner. Dinner was for upstarts, what la-di-das ate. Our tea – headless and oozing, scummed in half-jellied slime. In ruins to start with. Night after night. Year after year.

Her handbag still over her shoulder as she mauls the mangled chicken, long nails slick with grease, sucking on the parson's nose, undressing at the same time, screaming at me in her petticoat and Razzamatazz: *Tomato! Lettuce! Why the HELL haven't you buttered the bread!*

But it's 6:04 pm. Mike has started without her.

Mike Hilton, moustache heavy. The last word in newsreaders, according to my mother. Mike's six o'clock news, less observed than worshipped. If so much as the first half-minute of Mike's broadcast is missed, it all has to be missed, the dial smacked *OFF* in fury. But missing the start means she has to deny herself the end – the cherished sign-off.

'Now I won't see Mike's "Goodnight and God bless!"' A catastrophe. 'You know how much I love it. "Goodnight and God bless! Goodnight and God bless!" Is that too much to ask out of life? *Christ all-bloody-mighty!*'

On such nights, those first few seconds lost, I can see she does her best to get past it, counselling herself as though she is two people: *It doesn't matter, Lon, it really doesn't.* Fingers fussing at the cloth mat under her plate. *Eat your tea. Waste not, want not. A sin, wasting food.* But missing Mike's opening – his handsome, *trust-me-Lonnie* face looking up from his paper copy directly into my mother's adoring eyes – clamps a hand over her mouth. She can't breathe. She can't think or listen to the rest of what Mike has to tell her. Panic rises in her like a killing flood. Eating tea and watching the news, all the news, go hand in hand. She and Mike, hand in hand. It's as though she is letting him down.

On Missing Mike nights, our plates fly like frisbees, our TV trays upended like Jesus in the temple with his cleansing whip of cords, making a mess of everything. Baked beans and fried eggs skitter down the walls, smear the curtains. Tinned soup and buttered toast sog up the carpet.

At least on this night we haven't made it past the kitchen, because tonight is different. Tonight is worse. Someone has obviously done something in the chicken shop or at work, said wounding words on the phone, treated her like the office junior (*that little tart*) when she's a *secretary, for God's sake! A private bloody secretary!* Her rage a slow, day-long simmer. And into the steaming pot have fallen other remembered slights – ancient insults, outstanding offences – a Lenore-long simmer now, an endless one, congealing the hell-broth until it boils up and over, too much for the pot to hold.

I know what happens next. This show's been running for years.

Flinging open the fridge, she goes to put the remains of the chicken away, the chicken that is no longer our ~~dinner~~ tea. But she stops. No. Storing it away, that chicken, to become leftovers, everyday leftovers, will not do. Why, that would be getting on with things when my mother is in pain – pain *good and proper* – and when Lonnie is in pain things *cannot must not will not* simply be gotten on with!

Laying waste now to that fridge.

Teeth clenched, fists thrashing side to side, the length and breadth of every shelf, motoring over cling-filmed corn, tinned fish, fruit salad. The milk and juice cartons spew and gush, the lettuce that falls to her feet booted into the hall. Like a dog digging a hole, she scrapes and scratches – everything in must be out, everything up must be down, everything whole, crushed. It ends when she flies to her room and slams the door, sobbing on the other side of it.

‘I’ll do better, Jay. I promise. Tomorrow I’ll be really good. Just you watch.’

Her bedroom light off, so suddenly, as though the room itself has passed out.

### **3:28 am**

Eyes closing, and Frank is back: *But we never watch the news.*

I think of the eleven-year-old struck by the train and all the headlines I never want us to become.

‘No, darling,’ I say into the dark, ‘we don’t.’