

The Light Comes Pouring Out

Maureen's not feeling her best so it's just me. She tells me not to forget the Battenburg. And the teabags. Small things in life and all that, but well, I can't do much about anything else. I put on my coat, say goodbye and leave the flat.

It used to be that you could see the steamers as you walked down the road, big things with the steam all tumbling out as they passed upriver, hooting at each other as they went. Now there's nothing to see but blocks of flats, and nothing to hear but the whine of scooters as the kids race up and down. It feels to me like some of the poetry's left the world. I mean, there's a beauty to working things, isn't there? And now everything's just housing, with no real industries left. Maureen says I'm talking rubbish when I go on in this way. Everything changes, she says. First that, but this will too. Nothing's forever.

Moving takes an age now: one step then a bit of a wait, then the other, stiff legs and sore muscles, breath coming all shallow. Sometimes I think I want a bit of a rest but there's no-one here for me to talk to anymore; everyone's moved on or passed away. New faces now at the windows or standing at open doors, people from all over the world and somehow they've ended up here, facing each other from grey pebble-dashed terraces, their children talking a different language to them and sinking into ways maybe they don't quite like, and so they're left standing at the doorways and feeling – well, what? All of our children leave us now, whoever we are and wherever we're from, they move on and leave us to get old and break down. I walk on and they just watch. We neither of us speak, and that's just the way it is.

I sometimes wonder what it's all about: the rows of houses, the people with their kids, the boats bringing us strange goods from all over the world. What is there in us, what thing? Why do we get dull, used up and ugly – why doesn't it make sense? I'm mostly too tired to bother anymore with all this, but sometimes, like just now, I'll be walking down the street and it hits me, a darkness in my head, like something stupid I haven't got the answer to and everyone else has. I think you've got to have faith that everything at some point will slot together and have meaning. Patience, that's what I need.

Patience. Maureen can change it, she's always been able to help me out of this mood one way or another. But today it's just me, with the Post Office counter and the Kwik Save feeling a long way away. Funny that, how fragile it makes me feel.

What once took five minutes now takes fifteen, but I finally reach the parade of shops on Hermit Road. So much brighter than it used to be; plastic fascias backlit by fluorescent tubes, luminous primary colours offering me fried chicken and halal pizza, a waft of stale coffee from the Ladbrokes, the shut housing office (due to staff shortages, a handwritten note declares) and even the litter rolling about the gutters: coke cans, crushed McDonald's cartons, chip wrappers. Odd how things change. Way back when I remember walking down this street holding my mother's hand – oh, the number of times makes all this now seem like a gaudy dream, so familiar and yet not, the same curve to the road but the buildings shrunk and packed in tight, painted advertisements across dirty black brick, bitter smoke from the power station down by the Lea, a narrow line of shops selling everything that back then you could need, the tailors and costermongers and whatever else, carpenters, butchers, the drunken dockers spilling out from the pubs, Lascars selling oilskins as their daughters mended shoes. It's like it all never happened now, a whole slice of life obliterated, unmourned for; everything moved on and not a trace remaining. That's just the way of it: so much pain and love and enjoyment, and then suddenly it doesn't matter, it's gone away. As will this thing following on.

This darkness in my head.

I enter Saraswati News and join the queue for the Post Office counter and there in front of me are some of the same old faces. The only time I really get to see people is in this queue. I can hear Mrs Arleigh at the front complaining to Mrs Lal about the immigrants, and Mrs Lal as she always does maintains a poker face, counting out the money, twenties then tens and a little loose change, then asks Mrs Arleigh about her family. "Darren, well, you know, he's in trouble again, and as for Arlene, well, it's a dreadful thing Mrs L, she just can't get a hospital appointment. Just

cannot. It's those Albanians, don't you know? They just go straight to the front of the queue, never mind us what live here all our lives." Mrs Arleigh pockets her money, leaves and the queue shuffles forward.

I tap Bill, in front, on his shoulder and he turns round. His face is a patchwork of red and white and he coughs a lot before talking, complains about his angina. It passes the time, and the queue shuffles forward again. "You know that they want to pay us electronically," he says. "They think it's too expensive to have us standing here. They'll pay us by computer and then it'll go in and straight back out again without any of us knowing. At least when it's in your hand it's real, and you can bugger off and do whatever, really. You can't when it's all electronic. You're at their mercy. It's shameful. I paid my taxes, used to fight for this country and now..."

We shuffle forward again, and it's Bill's turn at the counter. He tries chatting up Mrs Lal as he always does and she just laughs, both embarrassed and astonished by the impossibility of it. He goes on about the Punjab and all the brightly clad girls in the fields and she laughs slyly and talks about her grandfather's calico factory in Canning Town, the other one, in West Bengal, closed down by the British in 1942 for harbouring political activists. "I'm sure they did the right thing," Bill says gruffly, embarrassed in his turn, before retreating clutching his money, leaving me next in line.

Mrs Lal asks me how Maureen is and I say fine, a little under the weather but nothing serious. "How are the girls?" I ask her, watching as she stamps the various bits that need to be stamped and gets out the money. "The eldest has gone back to university," she says. "It's always such a worry and she never phones. But well," she shrugs, all feigned indifference, "her marks are good so I can only pray to God that she's behaving herself. As for the other one," she raises her eyes towards heaven and makes an expansive gesture. "*Heh Bhagwan*. It's all skimpy clothes and terrible music. There she is, so young and already into all this sex stuff. I hear these things she listens to and it makes *me* blush..."

She counts out the money.

"When I think that I caused a scandal in my teenage years by talking to my husband before we were married, and now look, that's just a joke. What can we do? She's my daughter but all these shops and magazines, all they want her to be is a – a sex kitten. She's just some thing they can sell all this rubbish to any way they can; she's just a clothes hanger to them. It's completely out of hand."

"I know. But I suppose it'll...work itself out in time." I shrug. "I find it all baffling, to be honest."

"I know. Why anyone would want to..." She sighs and shrugs. I take the money she hands me. "I hope it does sort itself out, and quickly, please, too." She touches her neat bun of hair. "My mother had nice black hair until she was sixty but me, well, I'm nearly all grey already. Worry."

"I'm sure it'll be okay," I say. "I mean, I'm sure every age has its trials."

Mrs Lal just laughs and waves me away. "Optimist! See you in two weeks. Next please!" Two weeks. Like a metronome – tick, tick, back and forth, on and on, on and on.

You don't ever really come to terms with your own body's disintegration. I can't help but hark back to when I could do almost anything I pleased, strong as an ox, and my body would just take it. Things I didn't have to think about; just popping down the shops or whatever, you reach a certain age and the legs start to go, nothing wants to work anymore, you heart pounds every step of the way and it becomes a major expedition. Even if you're alright in your head, well, everything else... It's just one of these things, one of these stupid animal things that simply happens and well, I've got to come to terms with it, and then I've got to carry on anyway, otherwise there I'll be stuck in front of the television driving Maureen mad.

It's chilly back outside, and I pull my coat a bit tighter around me as I carry on down Hermit Road, cars thundering past, angry music blaring from the windows. There's a trick I once learned, one I've always remembered, and even though it's one I've got worse at as I've got older it's still occasionally good for getting rid of the darkness in my head. Take anything, a house or a tree or a road or whatever, and just stare at it until you can see the light pouring out of it, the

beauty and the meaning. When you've got it, that's the difference you've found between a life that's worth living and a life that's not. Well, if ever there was a time, I guess trying it now can't do any actual harm.

I turn onto Barking Road, McDonald's on one corner, betting shop on another, His Grace African Haircare Products on the third. It takes me two changes of the lights to cross the road. Over at the other side I take a rest, stopping and staring across at the bright red-brick buildings, same as they ever were even from my youth, a bit cleaner now and holding a Vietnamese restaurant, a computer games shop, Shoeworld, Desi Fashions. Holding me out; I am a stranger to it, despite living my whole life here and knowing every brick and every window arch. I try the trick, just standing and letting the traffic roar by, letting my eyes lose focus, waiting for it, the past here and the future as well, waiting for the buildings to open up and the people present and past to all come marching forward as one, light pouring out and melting us all together. It doesn't happen; I can't see anything but what is in front of me, watching a pizza shop and thinking all the while about what one of the police officers told me recently, at a community forum thing, you know, how a lot of the pizza shops along Barking Road are only there as cover for brothels, and that upstairs in the flats are Eastern European women who have been smuggled in and then locked in rooms, beaten, raped and plied with drugs, you don't want to think of it but there it is, those words, that idea, processions of hungry men. The bricks are still bricks and the mortar still mortar; it hasn't worked for me, I'm in a darkness like I am so much more of the time now, and listening to Maureen it often comes down to faith for me. When I can't see it I just have to believe. It can't be that all of this goes on without reason; those poor girls locked in those flats for nothing at all, no recompense, all that lost time, lost youth, lost love. One day it will all fit into place and make sense, even if that's some kind of reward after we die. I don't know.

What did Maureen want me to get her? That's right, Battenburg. And some more teabags. So it's a walk along towards the foot of the A13 flyover, cars flashing across and away like silver fish, Canary Wharf hanging the other side like a mirage. Things can't go on as they are, just as they couldn't before. Mrs Lal and her daughter, the Eastern European girls, Canary Wharf too. However big or difficult any of it seems it'll all change. I'm passing Rathbone Market and I can remember when it was teeming, cramped, swarms of people filling the streets, every thing imaginable from every corner of the Empire, from pyramids of oranges to tent sheets for soldiers or my mother buying sheep's heads to boil on a Sunday. Lost and gone, the old bits demolished and then rebuilt in the sixties, a sorry affair, half-empty and littered with the flotsam unwanted elsewhere. Strange, these two times living at once in my head, that earlier one seeming so much more vivid and full of life but not even existing to most of the people here. Not even existing anywhere, and what to be learned from it? I feel sorry for them all missing it. They missed, well, I don't know, *life*. Maureen would say that it's just me, it's just getting older, and maybe if no light pours out of me then no light pours out of it.

This is it, I suppose, and you've got to try because if you don't, well then there's nothing. Nothing at all except things being what they are. Terrible, incomprehensible. Through all the pain and the shortness of breath and really my legs are starting to go now, it won't be long before a stick or a frame or whatnot. I shuffle up the ramp and the doors slide open, that blast of air, strip-lighting like something cruel, bodies in tins and stripped under clingfilm, cartoon faces and packets of nothing and everything ignores me, everything holds itself back and I've got to try, walking forward past the special offers and the bleached young women, the rows of freezers, the shelves, cartons and boxes and the promises, hand on the Battenburg and then the teabags, nothing changes in here and I'm trying, trying to see past everything into the light. All these years we've been together, you know, and well, despite my darkneses we've always got on, and who can say better than that here, standing at the supermarket fumbling with my change? Who can say better? I feels good to just stand and think on that, trying to fish out a twenty pence piece from my trouser pockets and I'm kind of just staring, looking at the baked beans and thinking that it's been fifty years near enough, half a bloody century married to Maureen through thick and thin; pulling the place down and putting it up again, all the cranes and the dockyards and the strikes, everything closing down not long afterwards, just imagine it all like a reel of film that no-one can see but that is playing behind these walls, all these secret pictures and lost sounds, a great blissful pain of the truth spreading out from my chest; I can barely breathe, fifty years and we're still here together through everything, and I'm just staring as the people walk past and then all of

a sudden the labels on the tins begin to gain extra colours, to become deep and bright and living, all those memories, you know, the long way back to childhood and the sweetness crushes my chest like a fist and there's light coming out of everything: the rows of cheap booze and tatty cigarette packets, the legs of lamb in the freezers, the eyes of girls playing games as their mothers gossip, a light pouring out from everything and I feel myself warm just a little, and suddenly the stiffness and soreness leave my legs. I get my breath, I get a breath, things moving forwards again and I guess I'll buy some chocolates, just something on impulse, nothing like a surprise and "ah that's sweet" from the girl on the till, staring at me just for a second and I think I'm sweating. I can't manage to say anything back, pay dumbly, shuffle back out into the afternoon.

I walk home (slowly, coughing, my legs aching again and shaking and perhaps it's too far now) and the light pours out from the houses and cars and discarded crisp packets, the abandoned gardens and scrawled graffiti, cats looking for a kill and new houses reared up on the bones of ones only I'm left to remember. Streets intersect and it all somehow feels correct, in its place, written like a word, luminous. I seem to walk home through a chorus of my own memories, through a blare of the future, and finally I understand the trick that all these years Maureen has been trying to teach me. *How to be happy.*

I reach home: the narrow door with peeling paint, the pebble-dashed face of the house streaked with dirt and a century of weather. Ships from a different age sail off from the horizon, blasting horns that nobody save I can hear. Scooters whine, music thuds through the air, lights come on in the blocks of flats back down the way. I fumble with my keys, utterly exhausted, breath shallow and hasty, agonizing tightness clamping my chest, dazzled by the light I can now see everywhere. I manage finally to pull back the lock and enter. I drop the shopping in the hall, pull out the chocolates with shaking hands. "Maureen," I call out, listening to myself wheeze. "Darling? It's me. I'm home."

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