

J

A story by Jonathan Gibbs, originally written and posted on Twitter, a tweet a day, from 01/01/2013 to 31/12/2013, on the @365daystory account.

Kicked into the furious blizzard of sound and light that only later turned out to be the world, J fought and fought to die, but all in vain. Bodies, smiles, babble: these were but insults added to the injury of existence. Only the honey flowing from the mountain had any meaning.

On the third day J drove home with her parents. They called her Jennifer, Jen, J-Bomb, J-Pop, Kiskadee, darling. None of this she minded. What she minded was the honey, when it refused to flow. The mountain was her world, her moon, with its cold north face, its warmer south.

J at four weeks: a boxer, punchdrunk and dazed, dukes permanently raised for an opponent that she doesn't yet know is on her side.

J at five weeks: a scientist spooked by her own capacity for discovery, superstitiously trashing experiments, methodologies, laboratories.

It was J's mother who caught her first smile - though they couldn't be sure, could they, said her father, that it really *was* the first. This was something that perplexed him. He took to spying on his daughter, hoping to catch her smiling to herself, unprovoked, unstimulated. It almost got to the point that, when she did smile at him, he felt aggrieved, as if she were humouring him. It didn't take much to win him over, though: the significant dance of eye and limb. Love recognised and reflected in an infinite loop.

For Tina, the baby's smiles were smiles through glass. The glass was fatigue, misted with the fear that seemed to come with every breath. She would turn around, on walking into the room to see to the crying girl, and walk straight out again.

It was.

There was something.

There was something about the baby that stumped her, even as it grew. Shushing it on her shoulder, she was shushing her own thoughts. It was not that J was not a loveable child.

Just that she.

Just that word.

That face, that set of features.

J's mother at five months. At five months, J's father: a dizzy bystander, peering into the well, whirlpool, web. Reaching for metaphors, fumbling them, losing grip. J at five months, a year, two years: the same. A doll in the chubby hand of Time. Time, that great infant, so careless of its toys.

J, too, had her dolls: strange girl-objects and blank-faced, stitch-mouthed rabbits, cats and dogs. Eunuchs in the harem of her affection. Funny how the most loved toy is often also the most neglected, not to say abused. Mooksie, J's pale blue dog - a clear case for the RSPCA. Mooksie, refused entry on numerous occasions to nursery, where such totems were not encouraged, languished on the dashboard of the Scenic. J socialised. She pushed a child off a mini-slide. She put her

fingers so far into a boy's mouth he was sick. She screamed at odd moments.

You know how a sleeping child is so much heavier to carry than a wake one? That's how J was, to her mother, all the time. All of the time. They talked about this, the two of them, when J was asleep. They tried to. He held her hand across the table and tried to get her to talk. But there's nothing you can say, is there, when you say 'It's going to be alright,' and they reply, 'No, I don't think it is.'

Relief came in the form of primary school. The intensity of J's commitment to her lunchbox, her classroom and her teacher, made up for much. The paintings that come home from school her father examines like a Druid the entrails of bird sacrifices. J, like all children, was a true artist. Once a painting was off the easel and up on the fridge she never looked at it again.

'What's your favourite food to eat, Jennifer?'

J looked at her teacher with hostility.

'I don't like ANY food, she said. 'Not to EAT.'

'What have you drawn there, Jennifer?'

'It's a frog.'

'A frog with a silly face,' said Olly, looking over.

J tipped paint over Olly's cat.

'That's a nice hat, Jenny.'

J kept her counsel.

'Your writing's really coming on.'

J kept her counsel.

'D'you want to play Lego?'

'Go away.'

'Jennifer, do you think Sally could have a turn with the hole-punch?'

A turn, thought J.

What's a turn? And what's one got to do with me?

J wanted a dog. But dogs frightened her. It confused her that she wanted something that made her nearly cry when she thought about it.

J's mother went back to work, was made redundant, found another job, quit. On J's seventh birthday she went to see her GP. There's nothing more depressing, J's mother thought, than taking antidepressants and knowing their effects won't kick in for a fortnight. She moved through the sugared chaos of J's party with a caution that might have seemed like reserve. The caution was directed at herself.

Is it possible J sensed a change in her mother? Hard to say, for how should a child measure her parent? Where is the yardstick for that? The instruments by which a child measures the world grow and distort, along with the child, even as the readings are coming in. Other people's parents are a useful comparison. J eyed her friend Em's mum on playdates, when she cooked them tea, or watched them play. She saw how the house shifted when Em's stepdad came home.

A man far more dadlike than her own, real dad, he charged the room, filled it. When he joined in their running around screaming games, the games seemed to become more real. Her own Dad was always pretending to pretend.

J wondered about brothers and sisters. If she lived life over she'd want to have one, but only if she could ditch them if they got boring. Which was what her uncle Alistair said about having kids. J wondered about the connection between having kids and brothers and sisters.

The running round in circles till you fall over game.

The fancy pants game.

The fingers behind your back game.

The you stink this much game.

The doctors and nurses game:

J, to Em, flat out on her bed: 'Well, we could take a bit off here. Lift here. Straighten this out a touch.'

But the games weren't *games*. Not the clapping games, nor the playground rhymes. They were just something you did, you were so bored. Friends coming round after school wasn't playing. It wasn't anything. J somehow knew that a thing kind of had to be nothing to be real.

By now it was clear to J that her parents were deficient in something. It was a secret she kept to herself. It wouldn't do to let them know. When they were in a room together they shrank. Skulked about like pandas in a zoo refusing to mate, pretending the other wasn't there.

J was 10 years old and life was everything that existed outside of tv, magazines, phone and net. There wasn't much of it she could stomach. There were times, in the back of the car, as she matched the loops of the telephone wires to the beats in her ears, that it all made sense. J's friends, like Em, passed in and out of her orbit like comets. She watched them come and go, but did not understand their motion.

There were boys, out on the periphery. They, and J, equally uncertain of when, if at all, they would be called on to make their entrance. Boys were appalling, unlovable things; appalling above all in that somewhere inside them, or inside her, loveliness supposedly lay dormant. (Did I mention that J's parents were separated by now? I might have forgotten to. J tended to forget to mention it, unless asked directly.) Not having her Dad in the house made things so much simpler, and so so much worse. The shed, bereft. The leaves, unswept. The stereo.

Her mother, strange to say, was unchanged. As if you could remove a planet from the solar system and all other orbits remain unaffected. It was like she hadn't noticed he was gone. J wanted to shake her. Be happy, at least, she wanted to say. Be just, you know, a bit carefree. She wanted to go out for pizza with her mum, go shopping. Watch box sets. All her mum wanted to do was make cups of tea and not drink them.

They circled each other like, like what?

What are we circling each other like, Mum?

Her Mum, who used to help her with her English homework.

Sometimes, though, it was enough to just take yourself to the front door, stand on the step and open your nostrils to the day. Standing on the doorstep J was half inside, half out. Half in the distant past of safely unlocked houses, half in the paedophile present. If she left now she could be at her father's house by lunchtime.

‘I’m just going out,’ she imagined herself saying, then stepping into the street, closing the door behind her and going, never to return.

J set off to her Dad’s house. Not taking her bag, or her phone. She is 14 years old when she leaves. By the time she arrives she will be 15.

She was fifth in the class to get her period. She is in the top three in the year in physics and biology. Squirrels flee at her approach. J ran her tongue over her teeth, following the blocks and wires of her braces. She hated what they did to her voice, how they muffled it. J put her hand through her hair, smoothing her fringe across her forehead. She hated having to go to her Mum’s salon. It was so dead.

J got to her Dad’s flats and pressed the buzzer.

Tho’ the walk had taken her a bit over an hour, she was a year older.

She hoped he was in.

‘Hi it’s me,’ J said. ‘Hi there!’ He buzzed her up. He gave her a hug, then let her in.

‘You’ve grown. You look good. How is she?’

J didn’t answer. She shifted a stack of magazines off the sofa and sat down.

‘Can I get you a drink?’ he said. ‘I don’t know what I’ve got.’

J didn’t want to drink some crappy Dad-like wine.

‘She’s not good,’ she said.

‘No?’

‘No,’ she said.

‘Can I live with you?’ she didn’t say.

‘If you loved me you wouldn’t have left,’ she didn’t say.

‘You wouldn’t have done what you did,’ she didn’t say. ‘You wouldn’t have dared.’

Sadness #1: people shouting.

Sadness #2: people talking but not saying anything.

Sadness #3: people sitting in silence at the kitchen table.

Sadness #4, thought J, was the sadness of Dads. Their own sadness peculiar to them, and the sadness they generate.

Sadness #5 wasn't real sadness, it was a chemical imbalance. That's what the GP told J.

The GP's sadness, as she told her, was Sadness #6.

Post coitem omne animal triste est, thought J, except 16-year-old boys.

The weirdest thing to J about losing it (best guess: fourth in class, girls-wise) was that it was to a boy seven months younger. That didn't put her off, particularly. What put J off was that her Mum had a new boyfriend. If her Mum was doing it, she didn't want to be. The new boyfriend spooked J out. Not in a gross way, just that he added an unnecessary, incomprehensible layer to the life of the house. It wasn't that not having sex made J feel grown up, it was more that having sex again seemed to have turned her Mum into a teenager. No, she allowed her Mum her new stab at life, good luck to her, and asked her Dad, for Christmas, for a really good set of headphones.

But there's times and places that don't work.

Breakfasts were torment enough without this lump, this Pat, hulking over his cornflakes.

J got 2 A Levels, in French and Psychology. She failed Biology. The way people looked at her, you'd think that wasn't possible these days. She wanted to do Nursing, and though some places would still take her she felt stupid about the biology. A nurse who failed biology. Great.

'I feel I have a lot to offer the caring professions,' J said, into the mirror.

She looked at her nails. 'This isn't about my mother.'

J had two job offers: nursery worker and healthcare assistant. ie, she said to Em, toddler shit and vomit or ill/old person shit and vomit. J took the hospital job. The idea of devoting herself to kids, at her age, felt perverse. They would swarm her, smother her, pulverise her. It was a shock, the job. Not the unstinting effort of it, but the effort *after* the effort. Not the hours, but the hours that followed. The people, too. Not the old dears, but the others, Tam and Sian and Kel. They were the other side of the balance. They balanced things. They were young

enough, and fraught enough, to give J a social context she felt at home in. She had a reason to drink, and to get drunk.

You wouldn't rape someone at their 20th birthday party, would you? J thought.

Unless he didn't know it was her party.

Or that this was rape.

The next day J was hungover, mad, sick, appalled. She called Kel.

'Who was that asshole?'

'What asshole?'

'The one who- fuck, forget it.'

Apparently he came with Kel's cousin.

'You should definitely call the police on this, Jennifer,' Kel said.

'You are going to, aren't you?'

Kel bought them takeout coffees and went with her to the station. J got the feeling she'd done this before. The statement. The examination.

J was back in work on Monday. Kel said she shouldn't but J said no. It was just a very bad night. Shit happens. As long as he gets put away. J would have not told her Mum if she could have, but it was just not feasible. Of course it wasn't. Her Mum cried and cried. J cried. Her Dad she didn't tell but he found out, obviously. She assumed her Mum must have told him, which only made things more unfeasible.

He pled not guilty, of course, and then the real hell began. Four months till it came to trial, and every day a shitstorm of self-hatred.

'I'll fucking kill him,' J's Mum said.

She said it at home, on the steps of the court. J feared she would stand up and say it to the judge.

One very bad night can gouge a hole in your year, like someone's gone through your diary with a marker pen. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Sh

J, and her friends, worked so, so hard to protect her from the fallout. Normality can be a religion, awareness of risk factors a creed.

I'm sorry about this, how bloody grim it is, how stuck on one subject. J, too, seemed like she spent her whole time apologising for herself.

At what point in a relationship do you mention this, J wondered. She would try various possibilities over the course of her life. Sometimes J found herself making a joke of it. It was some shit that happened to her when she was younger. She wasn't that person any more.

J sat with her back against the garden wall, face angled upwards, eyes closed, feeling herself become one with the sun-warmed bricks. J got up, walked inside and got herself a glass of water. The radio was on and she listened as she drank, feeling the water enter her body. God bless the suffering of others, J thought, for it saves us from ourselves.

J was too young to remember Thatcher, obviously. She resented her father's apparent need to explain her to her. Let the old bury the old.

J got promoted, did radiology training, became a union rep, got a flat with her friend Pamela. They went on holiday together to Kos. Life... life receded and approached like the tide, it rose and fell but only by a matter of centimetres, never enough to really get you wet.

'This is the sea that washed the feet of Helen of Troy,' said Pamela.

J dabbled her feet in that sea, and stretched her fingers to the sun.

There was a young Dutch couple next door. So sorted, so tanned and gorgeous. She watched them on their balcony, and blushed when they waved. Worst of all, they came over to invite J and Pamela out that night. They did go out. Ida and Maas were just lovely.

But on the last night...

On the last night there was shouting, then thuds and smashing. Then silence. Then more shouting, all the worse for being incomprehensible.

It sent J home in a fit of depression. If this couple, this pair of blond angels, couldn't be happy, what hope was there for the rest of us?

There were boyfriends, or attempts at them, but nothing clicked, nothing took. What saved J was online dating. It smashed the charade.

What she hated was the pretence that fate, or chance, had anything to do with love. She wanted control of the avenues that led to her heart. The list of dates, their foibles, faults and finer features, would be easy to list, or summarise, play for laughs or pathos. J shuddered.

J delegated her clothes to Maxine, her hair to Carla, her gym and running to Yula, her food, more or less, to Dominique, her TV to Pam. Acceptance of death was easy, J sometimes thought, so long as it came swiftly enough to destroy the thought itself. That was one of the things you couldn't delegate. J saw it every day at work. Beyond a certain point, you lost the power of choice.

J chose Aaron. He was one year younger than her, good-looking in a rather babyish way, a bit too tall, worked in a mobile phone shop. He also lived the perfect distance away. Accessible, but not bail-out-able. Arm's length. Yes, J liked things - the world - at arm's length.

J was clear that surprise parties were a no-no, even for birthdays. Surprises altogether. Don't produce the tickets, don't whisk me away.

She threw a mug at him once, when he came to apologise after trying it on at a bad time, and the buzz that flooded through her was immense. She glued it, the mug, and put it back in the cupboard. She had to remind herself not to make Aaron his tea in it too often.

How is it to not want to be taken care of, but still to be loved, J wondered. Not to be hurt, but not to be protected from hurt. After 18 months or so they rented a flat together. But here's the thing. Was it him she loved or his family? Brothers, parents. A network. Her greatest fear, after all, was being stuck with one person in a room in a house in a town in a country in a world. And, hey! Now she was.

Was there a problem in J's life? Yes, there was.

Did it have a name? Yes, it was called Jason.

Who was Jason? Jason was Aaron's cousin.

He wasn't around that much, but he kind of *hung around*, after he'd been there. J found herself organising family dos, dinner parties. He was quiet, attentive, watchful, all wrapped up in the sense that there might be something more there. With Aaron there simply wasn't.

J got up, went out to buy the paper, cleaned the flat. Rest of the day spent going to Ikea and wrestling furniture. #12May @MassObsArchive

The worst thing was, J seemed unable to see her dead in the water relationship as anything other than a personal failing, a personal fault. After all, what had Aaron done to wreck the relationship? Nothing. (What had he done at all, nothing. Not even when she threw the mug.) She set herself deadlines. Tell him, by the end of the weekend. If you don't, you must leave by the end of the month. No get-outs. She thought about forcing the issue. Shag Jason, job done. When she mentioned the idea to Pamela, though, the look she got was chastening. The only other option she could think of was the 'make or break holiday'. She picked the New Forest, somewhere she'd gladly never return to. In the end, they split up on the drive down, on a garage forecourt somewhere near Farnham. J insisted Aaron have the rented holiday cottage.

J took the train back to their flat, crying, lay on the sofa, crying, went to bed, crying. Started laughing. Hard to do both at once.

J woke the next morning at 11.30 and walked around the flat, wondering. I've got a week to sort out my life, she thought - again.

Why again?

The death drive, thought J.

And the Eros drive, yes.

But also the cleaning the flat drive.

J hit 30. Hit it, or passed it, I don't know. Her mother, on new pills, tried to revive things with her Dad. The grim circles of existence. By now her friends were beginning to do the kids thing, one after the other. She watched as they withdrew, fell back, slipped out of reach. J knew to keep such thoughts to herself. Of course really they were the ones forging ahead. She was the one falling behind. Of course.

The cousin drifted away, J's Dad moved to Ireland, her mother got married. Only the sick, ill and dying offered any sense of continuity. It was their job to ease themselves out of a life they clung to out of habit. It was her job to help them, wicked as it seemed to say it. They threw things, and broke things, and swore venomously in

antique fashion, and why shouldn't they, when this was how they treated them?

J was 33 when the NHS as a going concern went belly-up and she went with one of the private agencies - one of the older, more caring ones. Ironic that the earlier vultures had learnt to acquire some measure of compassion. It was the ones that came for the bones you had to watch. Work was work, which was both its curse and its saving grace. The flat was now a house, but the man side of things still rankled. J and her other single friends did the joke about how much better things would be if they were actually gay, only it wasn't funny, actually. And the one friend she knew of who **was** gay was no less miserable than the rest of them. The marrieds, and the might-as-well-bes, at least had someone to share their misery with. Babies, thought J, were just misery made concrete.

The sun shone, and she went out in it.

The rain fell, and she went out in that, too.

J was immune to the dangers of the pathetic fallacy.

Did what you saw on the insides of your eyelids change according to the colour of your skin, thought J, sat in the park, closed eyes lifted. J walked down to the river that slicked its way between concrete banks, slowed by mats of dead foliage and stuck rubbish. Yet it drew her. The blockages couldn't stop the water, though, on its voyage to the sea. Even some of the rubbish got carried along. J watched it go. If life was like a river, J thought, then this was where she was now, in the middle stretch, caught up with the plastic bags and beer cans. She finished the Snickers bar she was eating and tossed the wrapper. It uncrinkled in mid-air and fell into some nettles on the near bank.

The middle of the day, the middle of a sandwich, the middle of the night, the middle of a book, the middle of an argument. J inhaled sobs. J steeped her hands and pressed herself into them, forefingers cold where eyes meet nose, thumbs on her cheeks, rolling the flesh of them. It was something like prayer, and something like yoga. But mostly it was the best way of holding the body together, keeping it in one piece.

This was J, at home now, in her flat, holding fast to the thought of her body, there in her flat. The flat was her home. Her body too? She knew what was in the flat, what it was equipped with - what she had equipped it with - but the mere thought of it was a blazing terror. It was equipped with cupboards, and things in cupboards. Bottles, packets, and the things that came in the bottles and packets.

This was why J kept her hands so tightly fixed on her face.

When the weaponry is so close by - so close at hand - and the target, also. It's not like J hadn't known - didn't know - colleagues who'd helped themselves to bits and pieces from the medical cupboard at work. What she was thinking of, though, wasn't the kind of prescription-only helpmeets they tended to snaffle. This was more common, more certain.

J's hands crept over her eyes. Go swimming, she told herself. Go running. Go swimming or running or something.

'Please,' she said.

All you have to do is get up and walk out of the house, J told herself.

J got up and walked out of the house. She was shaking. She shook.

All you have to do is not walk to the pub and order a whisky and coke, J told herself.

She walked to the pub and ordered a whisky and coke.

Whisky and coke good in the pub (camouflage drink). Vodka tonic with the girls. White wine at home, chilled to fuck to mask its awfulness.

The look on her line manager's face during her annual appraisal.

J's shrug, as if: 'Do we really have to do this?'

The look: 'Yes, we do.'

The framing of the questions. The sledgehammer concern. The offers of help. The veiled threat: get help, or we'll find a way of losing you. Alcohol alone refuses to judge you for drinking alcohol. For *abusing* alcohol.

The alcohol doesn't seem too harmed by it, J thought.

It's never too late to feel inadequate, never too late to take comfort where it's offered. Never too late for it to be, basically, too late. You can't drink that much in a day, or in a night, but you can drink a *lot* in a month. A lot can get drunk. It helps if you have help. Drinking with others helps when it comes to drinking alone, J thought. Drinking alone is a great help when it comes to being alone.

Drinking breeds unclear thinking.

Unclear thinking breeds despair.

Despair breeds nothing, it has no product, no fruit, no exit to speak of.

A handful of nothing. Rattled out of the bottle, onto the table.

The taste of nothing, bitter in the throat, washed down with orange juice.

Strange to see a destination approaching as if in a dream but then wake up out of place, at the wrong station, throat raw, in hospital.

The shame of it: tube up the nose.

Shame of it: having to ask 'What hospital?'

Shame: not knowing: who found her.

How?

What had she done?

The first face you see is your mother's. It's rather like being born again, but with the consciousness that this is not truly so. Laid out on the bed you can't even put your face in your hands, or your hands to your face. Everyone that comes into the room, sees you.

Pam, at least, looked like she wanted to slap her.

'There's yer fucking grapes,' she said, dropping them on the bed. 'Hope you choke on em.'

J's mother talked of God, Pam of less diffuse sources of help. Her father flew in from Copenhagen to hold her hand and shake it up and down.

Grapes, soup, mash. Mangoes were lovely. Cornflakes, even, were too scratchy on the throat after the treatment it had had.

Swallowing, J felt like the Little Mermaid, walking across miles of broken glass. Blinking, she felt like a rabbit in a lab test.

Then the shame of having her mother move in with her - 'just for a week or two'. She'd clearly been in already, the place was far too clean. Bizarrely, the thing that seemed to help the most was the television. J watched shows she'd never bothered with before. Soaps. Reality TV.

TV offered a base hum of normality to her day. The more of it she watched, the more normal she felt, violence and melodrama notwithstanding.

Sometimes J's stepdad came round too, and sometimes his daughter as well, a bit younger than J. The four of them, sat in J's living room. How weird it is, thought J, when there are more people on this side of the television screen than on the other. Television. TV. Telly. A distraction. A gadget. A window onto another world that's just a bit too close to our world to be believable.

J at 43: a woman ready for a change of scenery, or face, or fortune.

A woman who averted her eyes whenever she walked past a mirror.

A woman in the habit of building piles of coins on cafe tables.

Of cleaning the flat for the whole of Saturday morning.

Of sleeping late.

Family move off, friends move in. Friends become not people you share life with, but with whom you share the impossibility of living. People share the thorns and torments, and you hope the sharing makes up for them. It must do, thought J, because we're all still here.

If J never opened another can of tomato soup in her life, it'd be no hardship. Although, she thought, she'd not be alive long to enjoy it.

Sometimes a day goes by and you don't even notice it. You don't even see it. You don't experience it.

J looked back at her Saturday and thought: did anything happen? Did I *do* anything? Was I *there*?

Writing lists was becoming a habit. Problem was, J found it impossible to get beyond two items.

1. Haircut.
2. Garden.

Never a 3. By the third item, J had lost interest, or lost belief. The third item, too often, seemed to include *everything else*.

J's father died. He was living in South Africa, and there was strife over where he should be buried. Half here, half there, thought J.

Will there never be any end to this, she thought, to people dying? No, she answered. There's always someone waiting in line.

She lost another day travelling to the funeral. Her fear was that she would see someone she knew on the flight. In this state, this state.

It was, in fact, her first time anywhere in Africa. To bury her Dad. Looking on while his new family claimed him, put him in their ground. She was worried, but there actually weren't many of them. Nobody in her family seemed to have the ability to live except nearly alone.

Her poor Dad was certainly no advert for Starting Over Again.

'He was happy,' his widow, Marjorie, said, but J didn't believe her. Marjorie at least didn't try to take J to her expat bosom. She glared at her with a relieved sort of hostility. There was nothing to share.

Her mother didn't come for the funeral, which was good - and bad. It made J sole representative of her father's first, British existence.

It was hot and windy and strange. A strange place to die, and a strange place to be buried. Dust to this foreign dust. The blackness of the blacks unnerved her, not like at home. The thought of apartheid seemed to darken her vision, unbalance her steps. It was as if she couldn't see them, the people of this nation, without their history wrapped round them like a cloak of toxic rumours.

Flying back to England was a blessed relief, to be oppressed once more my one's own history, one's own country's failures. The sky the colour of pavement, the fields the colour of sewage, the cab from the airport stop-starting down the traffic-jammed A road.

Then when she got home she found she'd left her phone there. Or had it stolen. It took her three sorry days to sort out a replacement. At 48, J wasn't expecting to get excited about a new bit of kit. This gadget, though, that the salesgirl recommended for her, was incredible. She spent a day just playing, sorting out her contacts list for the first time in years. So many names she didn't know. So many to delete. Deleting her father's contact details felt weird, a new kind of ritual, for a world she didn't feel like she belonged to, nor wished to. Her mother's postal address was two homes' old. She worried about her, now, knowing that she would be in charge of her dying, her death.

J was now managing a team of 30 people in a late life ward, with maybe 1,000 passing through a year. And she thought of her mother. Her father's death she could live with, but her mother was her last connection to some kind of natural order. This was what she feared. Her mother had done her maternal duty, however badly. She hadn't even done that. To leave no mark on the world was not to have lived.

'I want to have a living will,' J's mother said to her.

'I want one too,' J thought. We can make them together. What fun that would be.

It time for her mother to move into sheltered accommodation. 'Sheltered from what?' thought J. Not from anything worth sheltering from.

She was like the queen of a domain where she was feared, but which she herself despised. And of which she would one day be a citizen. All the homely quotes, all the bromides, all the evil, gentle lies, would one day be deployed at her, for her benefit. It made her shudder.

J took holidays like she had breakfast, more from a sense of bodily need than any felt pleasure. Not breakfast, even, but her morning shit. Cruises she liked, for their rationed pleasures, the way they made the world manageable, every unforgettable place a speck on an itinerary. A cruise would be good if you didn't have to come home, or else if you didn't have to set sail, J thought.

What happened next, though, was that J's mother's friend Susan died, and J's mother asked her to drive her to the funeral, near Inverness. She didn't feel up to flying, she said. The drive would be

six hours. So much J didn't want to do it, so much it was clear she had to do it.

First, J had the car cleaned. You don't drive your mother to Scotland without a fresh pine tree air freshener hanging from the mirror. Next you plan your journey and book a B&B. Taking a twin room with your 85-year-old mother is nothing like taking a cruise.

J's antiquated Honda made such a lot of noise, on the motorway, that conversation was almost impossible. Which should have been a blessing.

The funeral, like all funerals, was some kind of awful puzzle. Like a sick, sad version of Kim's Game. Who's missing? Who's not here? J kept having to explain who she was, and listen to everyone's explanations of who they were. She hasn't even met the dead person.

The room in the B&B smelt faintly of peanut butter. The window rattled. J folded the order of service and jammed it into the frame. The sound of her mother sleeping was unsettling. As awful as hearing them having sex, if that was even something that had ever happened.

The drive home, though, was the worst. Her mother, in her seat, seemed fiendishly intent to prove her aliveness. Vivacity wasn't the word.

'Look, sheep!'

'Yes, Mum.'

'Look at the little lambs!'

'Yes.'

J's mother fiddled with the air vent.

'Ooh, Jennifer. Look at that funny car.'

When J tried to get her to talk about her friend, Dawn, she just waved her off. 'Oh, she was a flibbertigibbet. Not worth thinking about.'

J drove her mother back to her flat, the manager waved hello from the common room. Then she drove back to her own flat. She opened the door. If there was a difference between them, was it any more than that there wasn't a manager to welcome her home. Not even a cat. Would she have to get a cat? Ten years till retirement, unless she went in five then came back as a consultant. A job is a thing to have.

There was a dead bird lying on the balcony. J knelt, scooped it up with care, then stood and threw it two-handed over the balcony rail. There was a shout from below, or a sort of yelp, and J looked down to see someone doing a dance of disgust, brushing at their head.

The woman looked up, angry. J instinctively pulled back out of view.

‘What the fuck!’

J looked back over.

‘Sorry. It was an accident.’

‘So *gross*.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘You dropped a dead bird on me. What the *fuck*!’

‘It was an accident, I’m so sorry. Look, let me come down.’

J dithered for a moment before snatching up a towel, a plastic bag and a packet of wipes, then made her way down the stairs, breathing hard. The woman, she thought, was in her 30s. Looked like she was out jogging, or running, as you seemed to say now. J pushed open the front door.

J held out the wipes and towel to the woman, whose look of anger softened to laughter.

What must I look like, J thought, and laughed, too.

The woman wiped her hair with the towel and gave it back. Would she like a drink, J asked? The dead bird splayed on the ground between them.

‘Are you going to throw any more dead birds at me?’ asked the woman.

‘That was my last one,’ J said.

‘Fair enough.’

J led the way upstairs. The woman’s name was Denise. She drank a glass of water, looking around the room as she glugged, face red, running gear humming with sweat. She put down the glass and walked straight over to a photo J had hung on the wall, of a view in Devon.

‘What’s this?’ she said, touching it.

‘Just somewhere I went once.’

‘Did you take it?’

J nodded. Denise lifted her leg and put it on the window sill, stretching.

‘It’s lovely.’

Denise went on her way, ponytail swinging. J kept her eye out for her after that, and Denise seemed happy to stop by for water occasionally.

Again the thought occurred: is this what we are here to do, to cultivate friendships, as a gardener grows flowers, to see them grow and die? The way one’s understanding of life blossomed, just at the time that the opportunities for using that understanding shrunk. Did that mean J’s own mother was even now living in some realm of sagacity from where she saw all, knew all, yet could act on none of it? J’s mother was full of advice, but it was out of date, passed down from generation to generation like a pig-ugly heirloom, never to be used. J did keep fit, not running but swimming, yoga. A defensive, low-impact salvage operation. Cod liver oil would probably have done as well.

Denise invited her to her book group, and she went, once, but the book was difficult, and anyway they mostly talked about jobs and kids. Then, bizarrely, Denise invited her for Sunday lunch. It was her, Denise... and Denise’s father, Rob.

J laughed, then blushed, then smiled. Rob teased his daughter for playing at matchmaker.

‘I’m not matchmaking,’ Denise said. ‘I’m cooking lunch for two of my favourite people.’

He was divorced, three years older than J. Retired, having made his money in engine design. J tried not look like she was assessing him.

They arranged what they laughingly agreed to call ‘a date’ to go to Kew Gardens, but she got the day wrong and they had to reschedule. They rearranged, but it was raining, so they decamped to a nearby pub. ‘Decamped.’ He actually used that word, J was amused to note.

He did have the most stupendous sneeze, that was something that appealed to her. But how healthy was he? How long would he live? The word that never crossed their lips: ‘companionship’. And the

other word, of course: 'sex'. And 'loneliness'. All implied, all skirted. He asked her questions about her job. He made suggestions, sensible ones. He listened to her explanations. He let her pay for dinner.

Ha! Now I bet you've been on tenterhooks waiting to see what happened after the date. You dirty bastards...

Well, not on that day, but soon after, and after other outings, Rob did invite J to his house, and implied that she might stay the night.

She did.

They did.

With slowness, and solicitude, and over-the-counter assistance. It had been years for her, 'longer than years' for him.

'I enjoyed that,' she said, when they had done.

'I'm glad.'

'Well I'm glad you're glad.'

'Good.'

'Now I'd like a cup of tea.'

He laughed.

'I have to say,' J said, 'This isn't likely to happen very often, fun though it was.'

'Not even if I ask you to marry me?'

That shut her up.

'I'm not going to cry,' J told herself. 'I'm not.'

She didn't, either, or not until she looked over and saw the tears rising in his eyes.

J at 62: engaged.

Christ! This was not part of the plan. What did she have to offer? Her dowry a lifetime of missed opportunities. Then there was the question of Denise, her future daughter-in-law. A nascent relationship suddenly twisted in a new and unwieldy direction. She did acclimatise herself, J saw. You can't gainsay happiness - the way it smartens you up, shines your buttons, tucks in your loose ends. The relief at seeing her Dad settled, her fear of future complication. Don't worry, J wanted to tell her, from here on in, no complications.

In fact, they didn't move in together straightaway. In fact, they didn't move in together for six months. They discussed it, oh yes. Then, for a while, it all went silent. They stopped talking about it altogether.

'What happened to you two moving in together?' Denise asked.

J looked at Robert.

'Who, me?' he said. 'I've been waiting for you to come.'

J had no qualms about leaving her flat, although it was further to get to her mother's home. Also, bedrooms: she wanted her own bedroom.

J chose a bedroom at the far end of the upstairs landing from Robert's. Very symmetrical, but weird to have Denise's old room between them.

How did J feel about her work helping private age care groups divide resources between those who could afford it and those who couldn't?

Answer: Not good.

But how did she feel about having someone to talk it all through to? Someone on the other side of the glass of wine?

That *was* good. That gave a gentle, civilised twist to proceedings. Things make more sense when you make sense of them to another person. She needed to see clear, J knew, because it was her own future she was shaping. She monitored her body obsessively, her breath, her memory.

'If April is the cruellest month,' said Robert, 'Then what the hell is October?'

'April is just being cruel to be kind,' said J.

A hand held across a table is stronger than wood. Though the table hold a candle, the eyes that hold the hands bring a brighter flame. Robert told a story about a couple who died together and were turned into a tree.

'I could handle being turned into a table,' he said.

It had to come, and it did. J's mother died - and then, two days later, Robert's ex-wife. A hailstorm of grief, thunderous and violent. She vomited when he told her. His hand on her back. Her hand on her

forehead. Mourning is the fight to hold onto a person's absurd absence.

At a certain age, J thought, every funeral becomes a dry run. But her Mum had one more daughter sitting in the crematorium than she would.

The event itself was a blank. The week, the month, the season. J drifted through as if on ice. Moving without propulsion or sense of speed. A blank. A blank.

J passed her hand in front of her face. Her teeth ached. The fog engulfed her like a cold wirewool blanket. A blank.

Robert held her shoulders. She felt the hardness of his fingers, the hardness of her hunched bones. What life rafts. What jetsam.

The concert booked for next week. A blank.

A weekend in Herne Bay. Blank.

The dying wasps of Autumn have more to live for than I, thought J.

She remembered her own mother had taken anti-depressants for a time. She wondered how she might be under, or on them. She asked Robert.

'You don't need pills,' he said. 'If you need cheering up I'll just tickle you.'

J looked at him. Who was this man, spouting such idiocy?

J enjoyed being able at least to take an interest in Denise's life, Robert's daughter. Not in a stepmotherly way, but in a simple nosey one. She married, and had children - Denise did - and J enjoyed standing back, watching, seeing how life unfolded, closer than TV, and further.

Christmas was a walk through past and unlived lives. J couldn't be a stepmother, but she could be a kind of stepgran, if she trod carefully. Grandmotherdom turned out to be a sort of memory game. J's own gran loomed large, unbidden, unthought of for decades. New life all around. And that's what it felt like, this time with this mite, this sprite, this tiny Polly: a series of downpayments on personal immortality.

She could hold her hand, and guide her, sit her on her knee and croon to her, knowing that these actions would live on, despite themselves.

The girl learned, J watched her learn, wondering if she herself was unlearning at the same rate. The pause, the slip, the totter, the stare. As the child's body did more, J's body did less. The difference was the self-consciousness. The tide, going out, takes something with it.

It was like watching a film from twenty years ago, seeing the child work her way through the stages of the world. Or an old film recoloured. The hardest thing was how the child's world existed so much *down there*, at flower bed height, out of reach for J, even when sitting.

'Whoever said wisdom comes with age was a bloody fool,' Robert said.

'You do get some perspective,' J said.

'Perspective on your idiocy.'

The cough, the stumble, the snooze. She saw it in Robert, older. The snooze after meals, the nap between thoughts. The drop, the droop. The forgetfulness. The awful forgetfulness. It drove her to distraction. What was a person if they could not remember the simplest things? What use could they be to another person? Especially so when you didn't have a lifetime of accommodation to the other person. Robert was too new for J to forgive, instinctively. She forgave him much. His sense of humour, his love of walking - he went for *walks!* In the rain! As if that would do anyone any good.

Retirement suited her, Robert told J, but she wasn't sure she agreed. She would only have him to keep herself busy with, she said. Capiche?

Seen from a bus: a woman, probably dead, receiving CPR from medics. Her husband looking on, a wheelchair, aghast.

Robert's hand found hers.

J pulled her hand away, and shook her head when he looked over. She wouldn't be comforted. That man wouldn't be, so why

should she? Someone else's death is not a blanket you can pull around yourself, to keep yourself warm.

The awful premonition. The reason fortune tellers stay in business. When I come to die, will I be able to stand it, will I be able to cope? And will this man be any help, if he's there beside me? And will he help me, if it's him to die? J's anger at the uncertainty made her spit.

J at 73: a mess of ears, a remembrance of hair, a designation of breasts, an extrusion of knuckle - a body subsiding into its own basement. A fluttering hand, a futuristic (dystopian) hair cut, skin that crinkles like a paper bag, eyes that repel simile, and kill metaphor dead.

Books trickle through the fingers, information slips and is gone.

Only music stays, caught in the spider's web between the ears.

They argued, J and Robert, like the newly-weds they were. They hadn't had time to relapse into the ugly silence of other couples their age.

The car still her friend, not so other cars. Not so the roads. Not so dusk. Not so a deer, on a road, at dusk, leaping into the hedge. The car skidded into the verge, the engine stalled to quiet, sat there hands on wheel, her leg shaking, the deer gone, never there.

Who is alive in moments like this, thought J. And who would be? Rather the deer. Rather the wood. Rather the road, at dusk, uncomplaining.

She started the engine and reversed the car onto the road. Everything seemed normal. Except her right knee, juddering like she had the ague.

'I'm not driving that thing again,' she told Robert.

He looked at her, his face bland and set, as if for a palliative dose of concern.

She tolerated his idiosyncrasies, his deviation from the bland middle way that was *her* middle way. J knew that life, now, meant routine. She nibbled at biscuits, lest they choke her, picked her apples with care at the grocer's. She told them: life's too short for woolly apples.

Money to beggars, stints sorting clothes at the charity shop, organising leaflet drops. Giving was never enough, too much remained. What she feared was the end of giving, the slip or stumble that would leave her dependent, passive, taking not giving. The slip or stroke.

Despair, thought J. Despair was when Denise's internet went down, or her babysitter went back to Madrid.

Despair was an outcrop of the ego.

I might be having a stroke right now, J thought. My brain might be tripping tiny switches with every thought. How would I know?

The thin winter sun felt as old as she was. It was food but not sustenance, a weak gin. Beyond a certain point, everything is homeopathy.

J found it distressing to watch Robert eat, he was so greedy and absent. J, like Polly - now 10 years old - treated food as a curiosity. There was less that she could eat, and more than made her feel ill or out of sorts. Taste and digestion became a perplexing experiment. Tomatoes, brocolli, grapefruit, white bread, some nuts, coffee, Chardonnay... the list of banned substances was bizarre in the extreme. But she'd spent enough time laid cramped in bed, begging her digestion for mercy, to recognise her body's demands as paramount.

She was bored of Christmas now. She had tired of Polly, and Mia, her other step-grandchild. She couldn't forgive them their unfettered love. She could have them on her lap for a story, but they wriggled and shiggled, J read too slowly, she was too bony, the books slipped away.

They ran and twirled and looked back to see why she wasn't keeping up. It wasn't just age and brittle bones. J was done with keeping up. The air went gelid around her, her knees came up towards her, trailing the ground after them.

Hands in her hair.

Grit in her hands.

Breath.

Of course this meant hospital, the old abandonment to care and compassion. Robert seemed to age, hourly, at her bedside, horrid to watch. Denise perched, inattentive, half an eye on the girls. Robert sometimes snoozed. Pam came, too, to relax J with her helpless fussing. Pam was the hardest, for being such a longtime fellow traveller. All that water under the bridge. All those *bridges* under the bridge.

Walking stick. Fine unless raining. Rain means slippery underfoot *and* umbrella. Too much. Unless those awful plastic hoods. Stay indoors. Radio on. Television too far, even with glasses. Denise said they should get new telly. Really, for why? The radio was fine, thought J.

It wasn't that J forgot things, but that she had fewer things to remember. She had no need anymore for so much of what she once knew.

By the wayside.

On the mantle shelf.

At the back of the cupboard.

Peer to read the sell-by date.

Slips in the hand.

Falls and bursts.

J's last Christmas was subdued, slightly warped. The sense of it escaped her, Polly and Mia frenetic presences, Robert lumpen on the sofa. The shortness of breath, the horror of her own skin, face, hands. And against this - turkey and tinsel?

J coughed, she choked, she withdrew.

Christmas, New Year, Easter, the high breath of August, the slow turn of Autumn, the turn of the year.

Every moment, for J, a turning away.

J turned back, and he was gone.

Here was her daughter, a teenager now.

And her mother, too. Except that would be her.

It was odd indeed.

Her room had a window by her chair in the sunlight. The sunlight seemed to be trying to communicate something. Her hand was her ears there.

J at this age, this hour, this long strange moment: a hand that was a bird, moving in the air. A chair that was a home that was herself. In the end it was a mutual turning away. The world got up and left the room. J stood and, as she did, her life unscrolled before her eyes.