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Selection from the novel *Throw Away the Lights*

SECOND CYCLE

I

The lips of the vagina are pushed open by the crown fontanelle. She feels the haemorrhoids around her anus respond to the pressure. Released from the enclosed territory of the womb, the child shrieks against the light, as moments before her mother shrieked to bring her into it. Now the mother takes the child in her arms. For nine months she's felt the stirrings of life behind her abdomen, and for as many years as she can remember prior to this, she'd look at the flattened disc of her belly in the mirror and imagine it swollen, imagine the small fingers that now wrap about her thumb; this life of which she herself is the vessel. 'Blood of her blood: flesh of her flesh.' This life that she begat, and on whose body she can smell faintly her own vaginal secretions, her own shit. And she kisses the child's eyes.

She will love her.

She will love her, and she will protect her.

'Blood of her blood: flesh of her flesh: life of her life.'

Her belly once full with child: a solar disc.

There's a cradle, and later there's a bed. There are nightmares which are soothed away, and a pounding heart that is stilled by soft words. There's a broken line of trees that ends at a pond, and wishes made upon the green water. There's a white pavilion where the adults sip tea and lemonade. There are long avenues down which leaves blow in autumn. There's an infant, and later there's a woman. There's a woman,

and later there's an infant. The clouds assume the shape of whatever thought is fitted to them: this one is a clown juggling three poodles and two cats with his feet, and that one is a pony. There's an infant, and there's a child, and the death and renewal of tissues and cells that must confirm the one to the next.

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When the police showed up, Julie rushed over and asked them to do something to help the woman. Aren't the paramedics here? In that case, madam, one of them said, wait until they arrive. They didn't know. It wouldn't be long. Yes, terrible weather. At least it hadn't turned to snow. Still time, sure. Ready for a holiday; somewhere warm.

By now sunlight filled the room. The woman's cries, commencing after Julie had begun to clean some of the wounds to her face, had dissolved into a sequence of modulated whimpers and moans; the shadows cast by the sun seemed almost to carry the pitch of them along the walls.

'Where have you been? We called you thirty minutes ago! You need to do something to help her,' Julie was berating the two police officers again, having returned from washing the blood off her hands in the kitchen. The officers - one male and one female, both about forty - barely acknowledged the body at the corner of their field of vision. 'I think she may have hypothermia,' Julie continued, 'because she was most likely out there all night.'

'Wait until the paramedics arrive, madam.'

'What are they doing, stopping for ice cream?'

'They'll get here as soon as they can, madam.'

'Argh...stop calling me madam...fuck's sake!'

Ignoring the woman, they set about the task of taking our statements. After Julie and one of the other workers, it was my turn.

What was my name? An unusual surname, how did I spell it? Where did I live? And how long had I been staying there? Had I ever seen the woman before? Did I see anyone other than my co-workers near the

premises when I arrived? A bus driver...no, they didn't think so either. Would I be willing to give further information if required?

As a final question, the female asked where the toilets were. I pointed them out.

'You might want to hold it in, if you can,' I said; 'I haven't got around to cleaning them yet.'

Even though my contact with the woman amounted to no more than my having helped her out of the rain, an offence, if such it was, that Julie and Saul were complicit in, I now felt a sensation of guilt or unease. Absurd though it seemed, had the policeman asked whether I myself assaulted her, I might have said yes. Perhaps like the police officers, I wanted only to get through the ordeal as easily and hastily as possible, and move on.

The policeman smiled, looked up and down to see if anyone had brought him a cup of tea, put his notebook away, and moved on to Saul, who was already starting to arrange the tables and chairs, and distribute the set-menus, made of glossy card that was always smeared with who knows what by the end of the night.

'Bring me the condiments,' Saul shouted to someone in the kitchen.

'Bring you the what?'

'The condiments...CON-DI-MENTS...the ketchup and mustard and all that shit, you dumb bastard!'

'Hey, it says here on the ketchup: Store in a cool, dry place. We should try Louise's cunt!'

'It says cool, not frozen!'

Through the window looking down on the street I saw pigeons jabbing between the cracks of the pavement, hoping to dredge up a bread crumb or piece of greasy chicken skin that hadn't yet been lost in the deluge. There was a loud crash from the construction site opposite. Startled into retreat, the pigeons shot upwards, a vortex of grey feathers making ashes of the sky.

I walked behind the bar, through the kitchen, and on to the storage cupboard where the cleaning equipment was kept, picked out a mop and bucket and disinfectant and paper towels. If the police officers were right, the paramedics would be here soon. After they took the woman away, as Saul had earlier reminded me, I'd have work to do.

THIRD CYCLE

By the time my shift ended, the rain was still coming down. I walked back to the Briar Lane Hotel with Saul. When we were a few streets away, he motioned for me to join him under the awning of a twenty-four hour convenience store while he lit a cigarette. A continuous flow of water gushed from the eaves. The drains had backed up, and parts of the road were nigh on impassable. I stood and shivered as Saul blew smoke into the dark.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m cold...I mean, it’s cold...aren’t you cold?’

‘Sure, but I’m not a pussy like you.’

I cupped my hands to my mouth and breathed into them, as if this might somehow keep me warm. The sound of the rain was augmented by the tin roof of a bus stop a few feet away. Inside the shelter, racist graffiti adorned the time table. Fastened to the glass with tape, a photocopied poster requested information about a man from the district who’d gone missing a year ago. There was a picture of the man and below it a brief description, as well as a number to call. As was often the case, his body would presumably turn up in scrubland one of these days.

Next to it, the window panel had been smashed-in and covered with a plywood board. Using a black marker, someone had drawn a picture of an erect cock, with a large vein running down its centre and five drops of semen squirting from the shaft in a parabola. At a lateral angle to the stiffened phallus was a hypodermic syringe, the tip of which connected with the vein.

‘Someone has done a picture of your cock,’ I said to Saul.

‘It’s too big to be *yours*,’ he shot back.

‘Well, you’ve measured it in your mouth often enough.’

This was how we spoke to one another. It was tedious at times. But we had little else to say...little we wanted to say.

Saul began to talk about work related matters. I switched off.

Impressions from the past ten hours or so came back to me in random sequence; the grime on the toilet, the bandage around Julie's wrist, the angle of the woman's arms as she tried to cover herself in the chair, though she was already fully clothed. I was unable to make these images adhere. At one juncture it seemed they might form a conversion line, along which some hidden meaning or distinct trajectory from point to point might be conferred. However, they remained unrelated, fragmentary, merely bits and pieces going nowhere, minus purpose...torn by flux.

War-without-end!

The phrase entered my head at exactly the same moment as the images. I vaguely remembered it being there as part of something else, as I lay in bed that morning, listening to the argument in the room above mine. Had it returned to me just then, or had it been there the whole while, an echo that resided in my unconscious, and which events had amplified, so that I could only now heed it clearly for the first time?

This interlude of reflection was quickly truncated. My thoughts raced in all directions at once, as if, like the rivers and streams that networked the municipality I was in, they'd broken faith with the channels that ordinarily guided them.

'Blood of my blood: flesh of my flesh: life of my life.'

These words superimposed themselves over the others, before just as quickly sinking back into the depths of my mind. I saw a woman in labour...the child's head emerging from between her thighs...a cradle...a bed...a line of sycamores...the green water of a pond...the ides of summer, when heat grinds the nerves...clouds...*her eyes like two beaten eggs running out of her skull.*

'...and every time I touch it, I get a shock...I've fucking told them!'

Not having been paying attention, I only caught the last segment of what Saul said.

'Send it back to the manufacturers, I told them; it's fucking useless, but do they listen, do they fuck! I won't use it again, not for what they pay me. All those volts running through it! Shit!'

'What the fuck are you talking about?'

'You wouldn't understand!'

Testing the weather, Saul took a step forwards into the rain then resumed his position under the awning. Saul: was that his Christian name or surname...or perhaps a nickname acquired in adolescence and which for whatever reason he'd kept?

Ten hours a day, six days a week, I was never more than sixty feet from Saul. Even in the Briar Lane Hotel, which he'd moved into a week ago on my recommendation, our rooms were on the same floor; and yet his presence before me was that of a stranger.

Prior to his taking a room in the hotel, Saul had lived not far away in a hostel of whatever type. Before that, he'd shared a house with three men his own age, all of whom worked as waiters at a bistro outside town, until he came home to find the area cordoned off by police. One of the men had decapitated another with a hacksaw. His motive was unclear, and the case was currently pending trial. All this I'd been notified of by Saul. As for the accuracy of any of it...I couldn't say.

Aside from these few scraps of information, I knew almost nothing about Saul, except his mother was in a care home nearby because she suffered from a form of dementia that induced in her moments of unpredictable rage; Saul told me she'd once attacked him with a kitchen knife. There was also a sister, apparently, and she too was sick. Around the time I started my job, within the first couple of days, I'd overheard Julie telling Kathy that some years earlier Saul's father had been found asphyxiated with a plastic bag tied over his head. From what I could gather, she was speculating whether it might have been suicide, or a sex act which had gotten out of hand.

In a hotel across the street, the window to one of the rooms on the top floor opened and a teenage girl stuck her head out, shouting to us over the rain and the gales of wind whose rampage had broken a street light in two a few days before. It was too dark to identify her features, but I thought I could see she had long, frizzy hair...chestnut or red or maybe black.

'Do either of you want to come up, and I'll sit on your face?'

'Put some knickers on,' Saul shouted, without a moment's hesitation. 'I can smell your cunt from down here, dirty bitch!'

At once the girl was yanked away from the window by an unseen force, and a second later a man's head appeared in her place. He, too, had frizzy hair, but shorter, and unmistakably red.

'You whore-bastard...there...and...talk to my daughter like that!'

His words came to us mangled by the wind and a passing bus whose wheels were submerged under sewage. The pavements and roads had filled with commuters, in cars, on foot, riding bikes, all dashing this way and that to escape the rain.

Saul smiled: 'He called me a whore-bastard! Did you hear him?'

'Well, if that's the worst you've ever been called...'

'I ought to get the pigs,' Saul shouted to the man. 'What the fuck are you running up there, a brothel?'

No, *you* suck *my* dick!

'Stay right there...I'm coming down! I'll beat the shit out of you!'

'You'd better take your fist out of your daughter's arse first!'

'Let's go,' I said.

'What are you afraid of? It's not our fault if...'

'I've seen enough blood for today.'

'There *was* a lot for you to mop up,' Saul conceded. 'I hope you didn't get any of it on your skin. That bitch probably had AIDS! I would have offered to help, but, you know...I had other things to attend to in the kitchen, like the electrics...fucking rain gets everywhere, not even my place to sort it out...besides, I nearly got shit all over my hands when we carried her in.'

'Okay, you're right, pal, let's go. Anyway, speaking of shit, I need to squeeze one out, and I don't think...'

I bent to the ground and picked up a coin someone had dropped, and which lay flat at the bottom of a puddle. 'Speaking of shit,' Saul was saying, 'I need to squeeze one out, and I don't think that guy is coming down.'

'Here, treat yourself!'

Saul took the coin from my hand, then, in an exaggerated display of showmanship, he aimed for the window of the hotel across the street. The wind spun it off course. There was too little light and too much noise to see or hear where it landed. I laughed, trying to dispel the feeling of alarm which had descended upon me.

'Have you eaten today?' I said, deciding this feeling was most likely nothing more serious than hunger pangs, since I'd had only a slice of bread and butter all day, due to an upset stomach, no doubt brought on by something I'd sampled in the kitchen the day before...out-of-date ham...rotten lettuce. On the other hand, I realised, it could be apprehension in wondering if the man from the hotel might come down and start trouble for us.

'Done it already, pal...breakfast at Kathy's, and then lunch at that place around the corner; that's what I need to shit out now.'

'What place around the corner?'

'You know the one I mean.'

'If I knew, I wouldn't be asking.'

'The new place...*newish*...you do know it. Great food, and cheap, but it smells better going in than it does coming out.'

'I don't know which place you're talking about.'

'Piss off...you're just being awkward.'

'Why would I want to be awkward over something like this?'

'Never mind...I'm about to shit myself! I think the hatchling has broken its shell!'

'Come on, then,' I said. 'If we wait for the rain to ease off, we'll still be here next month...unless the floods get us first!'