

Elsewhere is Always Waiting

By William McIlvanney

She woke from a dream she was glad to be out of. She had been with Ray again in the old flat on the South Side. Yet nothing bad had happened in the dream. They had been drinking wine together and talking and laughing. As she lay staring at the ceiling, it was the intimacy they had been sharing that disturbed her, as if her mind were insisting that a long-past time in her life was still a part of her present, that where she was living was a more complicated place than she had thought.

She decided that what she didn't like about dreams was that they were no respecters of the reality you thought you were inhabiting. They were so subversive. They evoked places you didn't recognise or put you back in situations you were glad to be out of and made them so real that they became, intangibly but very vividly, a part of your life. They made you feel that the life you were living was not as solid and three-dimensional as you had been imagining.

Turning her head on the pillow, she widened her eyes and stared at the bedside clock, as if taking a compass-reading to fix her position in reality. On the fact that it was half-past ten the concrete present formed around her like a protective structure. It made her feel safe.

She sat up in bed and looked around her. Yes, this was where she lived, though occasionally she might wonder why. The recent activity of early morning re-ran itself in her

head, like a catechism of the meaning of her life. Dave had been late for work again, using frequent imprecations like rocket fuel to propel him out of the house. The boys had been their usual sleep-walking selves: pausing, with one shoelace tied, to stare for minutes into the mystery of things, casually assaulting each other as they passed. Zac had delivered a diatribe against the unbelievable enormity of having no Sugar Puffs, maintaining with passion that all other cereals were just crap, while Michael, a lofty two years older, declared that he wouldn't be accompanying a wimp to school. No wonder she had come back to bed to cuddle into her lonely sanity.

Still, she thought (as if chastising Ray for the impertinence of his reappearance), they weren't so bad. Zac, given an unbroken supply of Sugar Puffs in his life, was one of the gentlest boys she knew. Michael was always very solicitous if he thought she was worried about something. And Dave, she supposed, was in all ways a good example to the boys.

Having gone back to bed in her bra and pants, she rose and pulled on jeans and sweater. As she did so, she changed her thought about Dave to 'in some ways'. He always seemed to turn their bedroom into a wardrobe with furniture. Yesterday's underpants were on the lid of the linen-basket, not inside it. A pair of trousers lay on the floor where he had dropped them. There was a tie over the door-handle, discarded socks beside the bed. Why did some men have to leave signs of themselves all over the place, like dogs peeing at every corner to mark out their territory? She slipped her shoes on.

She thought about tidying up the debris he had left. No. This was the case for the prosecution. She would leave it there and ask him to clear it up himself. She had to make a stand, put a stop to the idea that she was some kind of unpaid maidservant, there to follow them around and mop up after male untidiness, for his attitude had spread to the boys too. To confirm her resolution, she looked briefly into the boys' rooms as well, briefly being as long as she could stand it. There were discarded clothes and plates with congealed half-eaten food on them. Each of their rooms looked like a litter bin with a bed in it.

Coming downstairs, she noticed some pairs of the boys' shoes abandoned haphazardly in the hall. Wondering if she should leave them there as well, she was distracted by the sight of Dave's v-neck sweater lying on the hall table. It must have been too warm to wear it. Certainly, it seemed bright outside. As she lifted the sweater, she felt its fineness and thought how fussy he was about choosing clothes. Maybe he should be as fussy about other things. He had asked her to book her own birthday dinner. Romantic, eh? This was getting too much. It had to be sorted out. Beware, my family. Many things will change. Domestic Armageddon is tonight! She was walking towards the kitchen with the sweater, thinking she might put it in the wash, when the doorbell rang. She stopped at the end of the hallway and turned towards the door.

All she could see were two dark shapes, one taller than the other, through the heavy layers of lace curtains he had persuaded her to put there after they had once been taken by the urge to make love in the hallway and she had insisted on going upstairs in case someone came to the door and saw them. The situation never repeated itself but 'hope springs eternal' he had said.

She waited, watching the door. Kathleen next door had told her that two Jehovah's Witnesses had been here yesterday, a man and a woman, when she was out. Let's be out again, she thought. Jehovah at the door she could live without. But the doorbell went again. Ah well, it's short shrift for Jehovah.

As she went towards the door she quickly tried to push the shoes to the left side of the hall with her foot. That way, she half-thought, they wouldn't be visible when she opened the door, especially if she didn't open it very widely. (And with Jehovah's Witnesses that wasn't a bad idea). The door opened and she went instantly from reverie into a vivid present.

First, it is the dark, uniformed figures of a tall policeman and a shorter policewoman standing on her doorstep, black as crows. Their suddenness is startling, sheer presences

stark against the brightness of the day. Panic takes her. Then she notices that old Tom Simpson across the street is mowing his lawn and her mind takes in the image like a talisman. This is where banality lives. Bad things happen elsewhere.

‘Yes?’ she says.

‘Mrs Howard?’ the policeman says.

‘Yes.’

‘Mrs David Howard?’

‘Well, Mrs Jane Howard. But I’m David’s wife, yes. What’s happened?’

The man seems momentarily to have exhausted his store of language.

‘I’m WPC Marion Copeland,’ the policewoman says, almost making a smile but erasing it instantly. ‘This is PC Bryden. Could we come in?’

They become an awkward grouping in the hall as the policeman closes the door.

‘Perhaps we should sit down,’ the woman says.

‘Tell me what’s happened.’

‘I think we should sit down.’

‘For God’s sake, will you tell me what’s happened?’

‘It’s about your husband,’ the man says. ‘There’s been an accident. A car accident.’

‘We need you – ‘ the woman says.

‘But how do you know it’s him? How can you know? How can you?’

‘He had his driving licence on him,’ the man says. ‘And a letter in his pocket confirmed his address. This address.’

She senses a terrible circumstance encroaching on her home and she doesn’t know how to forbid it admittance.

‘We need you to come – ‘

‘But the children are at school.’

She isn’t saying it to them. She is saying it to herself. It is not a statement. It is a prayer, an invocation of the power of daily things to prevent anything as unforeseen as this from happening.

‘We can arrange for them to be brought home, if you want,’ the woman says.

‘No! Why would we do that?’

The silence that follows becomes a darkness into which it is too frightening to look. It is as if the day has developed tinnitus, become a ringing silence beyond which all other sound is distant and obscure. It seems important not to cry. Crying will admit a finality that cannot be allowed. But someone is crying and a strange voice is speaking somewhere.

‘Where is Dave?’

‘He’s in the hospital,’ a man’s voice says from very far away.

A woman's face appears, strange as a gargoyle through the prism of someone's tears.

'He's dead, Mrs Howard. They think it was more or less instantaneous. I'm sorry.'

'But he just left this morning,' another voice is saying.

'We need you to come and identify the body.'

A woman is holding you. Her arms feel like a trap. To stay here is never to escape from what she is bringing. You have to be free of her.

'Excuse me, please.'

Someone you no longer are said that. It is a familiar remark from yesterday. But this is a strange today.

'Of course, Mrs Howard. We'll wait here.'

A door has closed. They are no longer there. You are alone. You must stay here. There is the novel he is reading, open on the arm of his chair. How the sunlight hits the pages. He is enjoying it. He still has to finish it. You haven't booked the birthday dinner yet. A lawn is still being mowed. How could this be happening if a lawn is being mowed? Around you the furniture seems cluttered, a jumble sale of charms. Surely they still work.

But is this still where you thought you lived? You must make this place again where you thought you lived. Touch the sideboard, feel its familiarity. Walk up and down here. The carpet feels familiar. You can smell his body in the fabric you are holding. He is still here. He can't be gone. Things are still as they were.

But how can they be, when you are crouched against a wall? This isn't where you live. You aren't who you thought you were. This is all you are, a woman crouched rocking on her haunches. Trying to measure infinity in inches.

Strange voices are talking beyond a door. They are waiting for you. They don't know that they mustn't come in. The door mustn't open. Rocking goes still. Silence means you are not.

Don't listen. If they cannot be heard, it cannot happen. Someone is knocking at a door. They do not know that you aren't here. They are elsewhere. They can't come in.

You must stay here, silent and still, or elsewhere becomes final. Let them knock.

You must stay here.

Creaking on the hinges he hadn't oiled, the door opened slowly.

'Mrs Howard? Are you there?'

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Supported through the Scottish Government's Edinburgh Festivals Expo Fund.