Reunion

The last time I saw my mother was fifteen years ago. I was in the garden, swinging frantically, upwards upwards, my toes straining always for clouds and the imagined coolness I would sink into. Then her face at the window, shadowy and indistinct, but yet absolutely irrevocably her. My heart beat the longest second and I was absolutely weightless, I was flying. Rushing of blood through my ears and everything blurred and fake around me, oxygen being forced around my body just once, no time no time before the next inevitable contraction, before she’d be gone. I was straining, desperate to memorise the crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes, the pale sanctity of her skin, the straight line of her mouth. Her face- it was expressionless as she watched me reaching for her.

Of course I had to fall; unbearably suddenly it seemed to me. I fell out of the sky, out of this dreamworld and then I was back in the garden with a jolt that sickened me to the point of nausea. The swing was rocking around crazily, tying itself in knots that it attempted to solve by going round in pointless circles until at last it was still and surrendered. I didn’t even bother looking up at the window again. I knew she wouldn’t be there. One tick, one blink, that’s all she’d given me. Hours later my father found me scuffing my feet in the dirt, getting them filthy. Wanted to know what in God’s name I was doing out here in the dark, all on my own, just sitting there like an automaton. And Jesus, the state of me. I just shrugged and came inside. What was the point?
Somehow I managed to grow up since that day. One of those things in life that you can’t see coming until it’s happened and then it’s too late. Is it possible to just wake up one day and be changed, different somehow? That’s how it seemed to me. It’s a horrible thing to stand in the mirror and see someone taller, to see a curve where before there were reassuring straight lines, to reach for something that was safe and yours only to find out that since yesterday it’s become completely foreign, sickening even. I tore all my posters down. They didn’t belong to me anymore. Went downstairs with a new walk and made my own lunch. I was an adult now.

So now I do grown up things. Here I am now in the very pinnacle of all things adult, mundane and hopeless- the supermarket. Pushing my trolley round in the prescribed order buying boring things. Nothing fancy, exciting or happy. One by one I pick up bread, milk, cheese like I know what I’m doing. My hands hover over yet more plastic packaging in the freezer and I have to jostle for space with ten other competitors- always women, this place is overrun by them. Grandmothers and godmothers buying contraband sweeties, aunties wondering if the borrowed children will eat the same as theirs, babysitters, neighbours, friends of the family and then, finally, the mothers. Mothers with two children in the plastic trolley seats, and another one- the eldest one- meandering along at the back of the procession, bored and determined to let everyone know. They have their stock phrases for this place, usually short and sweet- ‘don’t touch’, ‘too expensive’, ‘stop fighting’, ‘home soon’. They have the real trolleys, the deep ones, full of lurid colours and manipulation- potatoes with wide vacant smiles, cans covered in cartoon
characters and anything healthy hidden in breadcrumbs or batter. Yes, the mothers rule this place.

I'm looking for her I realise without even really knowing what I'm doing. Strange as I never really have before, not even on that day on the swing- she came to me. Do I even remember her? I didn’t have any time to freezeframe her, no time to prepare for the fact that tomorrow she wouldn’t be here, like she was yesterday and the day before. Didn’t even get to say goodbye, she deserted me when I was asleep, unprepared and helpless. Did she kiss me goodbye before she crept away or gaze at me lovingly from my doorway? Did she try to memorise me? These things are important when someone’s gone from your life so you can have your ‘last times’, your favourite memories. But when someone’s so constant, so part of the scenery of everyday life you don’t bother with preparing yourself for the eventuality of their not being there. You don’t bother listing for future reference what they smell like, what they wore, how they did their hair because you’ll be reminded of all that tomorrow and in weeks and years. Why would they not be there after all? Might as well just ask why the sky wouldn’t get light tomorrow. No reason. My mother just had to be the one that defied the odds.

‘She’s…uh…she’s gone, Mary. She’s not coming back,’ was my father’s explanation of the whole situation. To say he handled it badly was probably an understatement, it was as if she’d never set foot in our lives, never existed. But then how do you explain concepts like that to a child? Never. Forever.
‘Your mother is never coming back.’ I had no understanding of the word ‘never’, couldn’t grasp such an absolute when in the world we bend the rules all the time. You must never say nasty things about someone. Unless they deserve it and then it’s fine. You must never tell a lie. But white lies are acceptable. Sometimes. Nothing is absolute to a child. So I didn’t believe my father when he told me that my mother had left for good. But I didn’t look for her, I’d learned the hard way not to take anything for granted so my faith in myself to be able to find her was zero.

But today I’m looking for her. Because I don’t remember her. I’d recognise her. Recognised her all that time ago in the garden. But as for memories, those things you’re supposed to cherish, that are supposed to sustain you, I haven’t got any. It’s not enough, not even nearly enough to just recognise your own mother like you’d recognise something as basic as words and numbers. If I could just see her again properly then surely I’d remember something. Something that’s mine and hers. Shared.

She’s not here though. I’ve been looking, looking at all these women buying their children’s favourite food and willing one of them to be her. But I’m just surrounded by strangers. Other people’s mothers. I leave the trolley in the middle of the aisle purposefully and walk away, out of the supermarket. She must be out here somewhere.

I wind up at a primary school at letting out time. Just before the children come out I take in the scene; mothers waiting for their children just like mine could
have waited for me in a different world. They look the height of boring glamorous, these women. All the same as well, like those paper dolls you cut out from the newspaper- same practical haircut just above the shoulders, same sensible footwear, same coat out of a catalogue- identical really but for small irrelevant details. They’ve been given the mummy cut in an expensive salon though and their baby’s name is from literature. Pram’s designer too. People have to assert their superiority somehow even when you surrender yourself to the lowly mundane position of mother.

When the children do come out it’s not the joyous reunion I was expecting. They come placidly and unhurriedly, reluctantly even. They dawdle with their friends in an attempt to delay going home. They’re almost bribed into the obligatory hugs and the admiration of the scribbles they produced in class today. When I was at school, being passed round various friends’ parents day after day my heart’s desire was to have someone waiting specially for me, I imagined running into their arms instead of tagging along behind my friend to get a cursory hello from whoever had been lumbered with a child that wasn’t theirs. Don’t you know, I want to tell these arrogant children who are so sure of everything, that the carpet could be ripped from under your feet any day, any time? Mummy’s here today but tomorrow’s a new day. Anything could happen.

Next to the school there’s a park. I’m still looking, still searching. I have no idea where she’s hiding from me. Anyway, the playground’s full of kids and their noise. They run around playing their unfathomable games and climb on
everything, they’re apparently fearless in the way that children who haven’t
learnt about risk and danger usually are. Every so often though they look to
their mothers posted around the little fence like sentries, in the split second
before they attempt to climb to the highest point or make the leap of faith to
the ground they look to their mothers almost involuntarily, like a reflex. It takes
all the hazard out of what they’re doing because whatever happens after they
check their mother is watching, it’ll be alright. Worst case and you break your
arm, your leg, she’ll run to you, wipe away your tears, take you to hospital.
You’re not going to lie there while they all decide who’s going to have to go
and see to the motherless one, the abandoned one. Bravery’s all very well
and good if you have a safety net to fall back on, even one that you don’t even
realise you rely on. Still she’s not here for me though, still she’s holding me
back.

It’s nearly dark now. There’s only one place I know I have to go. I’ve known it
all day really, I can follow round normal mothers as much as I like but I know
where mine will be. And also that it won’t be enough, that I won’t get what I
want from going there. There won’t be any closure or answers from where she
is but I’ve got nowhere else to go in this pointless search so I find myself
drifting there anyway like I’m being slowly wound in against my will.

These places are horrible I find. Not ‘creepy’ or any of the other horror movie
clichés but just…empty of anything meaningful. Why would anyone choose to
come here? Leave if you must, if you really can’t stand me anymore but then
go. It’s cruel, isn’t it for her to apparently be here and be so easy and
accessible and yet she’s never here just like all the absent others within the gates. Wouldn’t it be better for there to be nothing of someone than this pathetic stone with these meaningless words? Because of course you’re obligated to come here, stand or sit and stare as if you’re doing something worthwhile. I’ve seen people talking before, on the ground with their legs crossed like children and chatting away, completely one-sided. To what? A headstone and underneath it someone who doesn’t have a place in the world anymore, not even here.

Hers is no better than any of the others. Apparently she was beloved. Beloved wife, daughter, mother. How false that someone who gave me so little of their life could ever be beloved. That day when I saw her at the window she’d been dead a year or more already. If I’d have told anyone about it they’d probably have summoned a few saccharine phrases involving the word ‘divine’ or even ‘angel’. Divine for a child to have their mother snatched away from them for a second time and this time to have the confirmation that she chose to disappear before I could get to her, before seeing her meant anything.

I understand the word ‘never’ better now, the commitment it requires- my whole life and more. Coming here just fixed it in my mind, this pointless journey has led to a revelation. I am never going to see my mother again. My decision, not hers.