
Opening Extract from...

JAM

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Jamming

The day was closing. The world was revolving gently, easing a new portion of its surface to the sun; London was moving along with it, towards the great darkness. Shadows were puddling under trees, stretching out from buildings, carpeting the streets. On the southern flank of Trafalgar Square, at the foot of the statue of King Charles I – which for centuries had been considered the dead centre of London, from which all signposts were measured – a young man covered his eyes before opening an email on his phone. If it was a rejection, well, he'd be sunk. A third of a mile away, a dog looked up at the Cenotaph. On Waterloo Bridge, a middle-aged gentleman chewed his fingernail to the rhythm of a dreadlocked busker's bongos, snipped it clean, and flicked it spiralling, a tiny comma, over the side. A woman from Leeds, struggling with a broken high heel, was late for a trip on the London Eye that was paid for by her clients, and arrived to see familiar faces looking at her from the oval capsule as it arced away into the gloaming. In Gordon's Wine Bar on the Embankment, a manic-depressive discovered he had won £210 on the National Lottery. Although it was a Sunday, the occupants of an entire floor of Slaughter & May, which inhabited the grand building at Number One Bunhill Row, were still at work; a dispute between two mobile phone giants had entered a critical phase. In the suburbs, a million kettles were being boiled. People everywhere were looking out of their windows, drawing their curtains against the gathering night.

Suppers were cooking. In Marylebone, a woman suffering the onset of flu opened a can of Heinz Cream of Tomato soup to

remind herself of her childhood. In Southwark, a man heated up a Waitrose Lamb Rogan Josh and strummed his fingers on the microwave. A fifteen-year-old behind Elephant & Castle Station – whose mother, at home, was cooking a chicken – gasped as a knife slipped between his ribs. A child fell over: the pause before the howl. In St Wilfrid's Residential Home, Chelsea, an old lady who had worked as a codebreaker during the war let out her final breath. On the seventeenth floor of the Royal Free Hospital, through the windows of which a vista of the city could be seen, a nurse was forced to wait a full fifteen minutes until a lift arrived to carry her down for her break. In Fortune Green, a schoolboy, who had been thinking all day about becoming a Gooner, decided to join the army. An estate agent arrived home to an empty house. His broadband, for some reason, was down. The Prime Minister misbuttoned his coat; a baby began life in a taxi on the Goldhawk Road; a chicken nugget fell to the ground; a young man who had once grown a moustache for charity cut up his credit card with a blunt pair of scissors. An obese resident of Bromley, face bleached by the light of the television, changed the channel, then changed it back again. An escort, on the way to her last job, climbed the stairs of a Twickenham hotel. People texted and tweeted and emailed and Skyped, texted and tweeted and emailed and Skyped. People ignored these messages. Everywhere immigrants strived; everywhere crime seethed; everywhere people were eating, drinking, flushing, fucking; everywhere people made supplications to a variety of gods.

Such was the wormery of London, encircled like a fortress by the sluggish moat of the Orbital, which, now and at any time of the day, was grey, and relentlessly so, though spangled with millions of headlights. A tail-eating Thames, straining against itself while vehicles in their millions ghosted past in a pageant of colours, with all the randomness of fish against the monochrome of the ocean. The M25 had no beginning, no end, and did not go anywhere but back, eventually, where it was. This was an environment one would endure to reach one's destination quickly,

nothing more; land for passing through; a dream which, upon awakening, could only be remembered in fragments, each identical to the others, and all so unremarkable that they were soon forgotten. The London Orbital, although scoring through 117 miles of Britain, lay on the surface of the earth like a snakeskin, as if one day it might be scraped up and discarded.

But: as the sun turned copper, the traffic began to slow. Drivers, squeezing their brakes, created scarlet constellations of warning. Something had happened. A tumour developed, hundreds of living cells amid gauzes of exhaust. Got to be an accident, said the driver of a Mazda MX5 to his wife, who was reading something on an iPad; she was hoping to make partner at her law firm, hoping to be the second female this year. Shall we turn off? Or sit tight? Several cars behind, a woman who had grown up on an army base outside Berlin said, hope there hasn't been an accident or anything. Dad? But he was asleep. A motorbike passed them, weaving its way along the queue, the driver turning his antlike helmet. A group of teenagers watched it as the bass-notes of their hip-hop thumped in their souped-up Corsa. One of them tweeted. A mile back, on the seat of a BMW, a woman wearing man's clothing slept uncomfortably, her face pinched into a frown as if gripping her burden even in sleep. In the next lane, a man who still thought of himself as young cursed his irritable bowels. The van behind: two men in leather jackets – the first had the face of a schoolboy, the second looked more like his mother than his father – were speaking on their mobiles, each in a different language. One of them knew in passing the man with the irritable bowels, though they were not on first-name terms. Two exits behind, in the front seat of a Honda FR-V, a man, fearing he was too old to be a parent, peered over at the two slumbering toddlers in the back seat, between whom was an empty packet of sweets, and said, just when the little monkeys had finally conked out, Jesus. Keep the engine running, his third wife replied. Behind them, a container lorry loomed. The driver, who had a broad and pallid forehead,

spread a tabloid across the steering wheel and rubbed his chin. He'd promised the missus he'd do WeightWatchers, but not done anything about it. The song 'Dancing Queen' was going round in his head, he couldn't get it out. Will be late home now, pain in the arse what with Sue's operation in the morning. Sod's law. *Feel the beat from the tambourine.* Fancy some bacon.

Standstill. The sky was tarnishing as black-winged night accelerated its descent. Over the swarms of grubby, gleaming machines, a fug of fumes sighed.

Max and Ursula

'This'll clear soon,' said Ursula. 'Don't you think?'

'It's all I need,' said Max, heaving up the handbrake in his meaty fist. 'Fucking pain in the arse.'

Ursula didn't respond. She was looking out of the window at the city of vehicles that had sprung up around them. They were in the middle lane, flanked on one side – as she often thought – by the daredevils, and on the other by the meek. Here I am, stuck in the middle with you. When did cars get like this? It felt like the last time she looked they were made of rectangles, squares, lines. Now it was all ovals and bulges and curves. Cartoon bugs.

'When did cars get like this?'

'Like what?'

'You know, all buglike. All rounded. Like sucked sweets or something. Jelly Babies. Sucked Jelly Babies.'

Max didn't respond. He tended to ignore his wife's remarks when they didn't make sense. He was an IT consultant, a systems analyst; he couldn't relate to her when she was in this sort of mood. Cars like Jelly Babies.

'I mean, if you didn't know,' said Ursula, 'you'd have thought we were all in capsules.'

'Capsules?'

'If you were an alien.'

'Well, you're not,' said Max. 'At least, I'm not.'

It never used to be like this. Not when they first met, not even in the first years of their marriage. They used to have a lot in common. When had it started, then? Like this?

'I told you it was stupid to drive back to London on a Sunday evening,' said Max. 'I knew it would be like this.'

'I suppose even our car probably looks like a sucked sweet, if you think about it,' said Ursula. 'They used to be all boxy and sort of friendly. Now they're like jelly moulds. You turn around and everything's changed.'

Max didn't respond.

They were sitting in the womb of a Chrysler Voyager, a car which, Ursula now thought, looked like it had been inflated with a bicycle pump. It was four years old; they had bought it when Carly was born. Carly was sitting in the back of the vehicle, in the sixth of its seven seats, on her booster seat, leafing restlessly through *Where the Wild Things Are* and talking to herself. She was a good girl, generally, and charming; Max's black and Ursula's white had given her toffee afro hair, light brown skin and – Max thought – eyes like the first light of dawn on a freshly laundered tablecloth. Next to her, in the fifth seat, was Bonnie, her friend from pre-school, a blonde and freckled girl with a perpetual stickiness about her, who was asleep, one hand clutching a doll, the other resting in a packet of crisps.

Ursula and Max knew the Chrysler had been a mistake, a result of the heightened state of excitement that had gripped them upon Carly's birth. We'll need something with a bit of space, they had said. A family car. For all the kit. And for when we have more children. But now that Carly was four, there wasn't so much in the way of kit. Or more children.

'You all right in the back?' said Ursula, twisting round in her seat. 'You all right, Carly?' No response.

'No news is good news,' said Max. 'She looks all right in the mirror. Bonnie's asleep. Thank God. Better let sleeping dogs lie.'

'If this goes on much longer, we'll have to call her parents,' said Ursula. 'They'll be worried.'

'I haven't got a signal,' said Max. 'Fucking mobile's useless.'

'Me neither,' said Ursula, looking at her handset. 'I got the sim-only deal from you, remember. Same network.'

'You can't blame me for everything.'

'Nobody's blaming anybody, Max. I was just saying.'

'Saying what?'

'Saying that we're both incommunicado, and we have someone else's child in our car. That's all.'

'Just thank God it's asleep.'

'Don't be so nasty.'

Max felt foolish and enraged, a trapped bull. He was a big man, and felt uncomfortable in cars, even a seven-seater. Nothing moved. The traffic around them fumed. There they were, in a little world of moulded plastic, padding, fabric, reinforced glass, a giant crash helmet. It was stuffy. It smelled of air freshener, the result of a recent valeting. Ursula hated that smell. The engine throbbed idly to itself as a succession of police cars caromed down the hard shoulder.

'Shall I turn on the radio?' asked Ursula. 'There might be something on about it.'

'Please don't mention . . . that,' said Max. 'That would be the final straw. We don't want to set Carly off again.'

'What do you mean again?'

'Again. First time, second time. Again.'

'I want TV,' said Carly.

'Not going to say I told you so,' said Max.

'She said TV, not radio.'

'One thing always leads to another with her, you know that.'

'If you'd only let her watch another film, we'd be all right,' said Ursula.

'She's watched one already. That's what we agreed.'

'But these are exceptional circumstances.'

'Rubbish. It's only a traffic jam.'

'Fine. You deal with her then, if you're such a genius at childcare.'

'Daddy, I want TV,' said Carly. 'I want TV.'

'You're not having any more TV,' Max said. 'God, what was I thinking buying a car with TV screens in the headrests?'

'It keeps her quiet,' said Ursula. 'You've got to learn to relax.'

'And have our daughter going to hell in a handbasket? That would be relaxing.'

'It's a DVD, Max, not bloody heroin.'

'I thought you wanted me to deal with it?'

'I do want you to deal with it.'

'I . . . want . . . T . . . V.'

'For the last time, Carly, you're not having TV,' said Max.

'Aaaw!'

'You can't have TV now, darling,' said Ursula, 'Daddy isn't in the mood.'

'Not in the mood?' said Max.

'I can have TV if I want to.'

'No, you can't,' said Max. 'Just read your book, OK?'

'I don't want to read my pooey book.'

'Carly, I've told you. Carly! Carly! Don't you dare throw that book! Carly! Right.' He took off his seat belt and turned to face her full on. Ursula shook her head gently, then froze under Max's glare. For a moment he was torn between directing his wrath at his daughter or at his wife. 'You're not having TV,' he said, 'and that's final. So do you want your book? Or not?'

'Yes,' said Carly sullenly.

'Good. Here it is. Now just be quiet and look at your book,' said Max.

'I don't want my pooey book.'

'Look, if I hear any more from you, I'm going to open the door and put you out there on the road all by yourself.'

'Aaaw!'

'Do you want to be put outside on the road all by yourself?'

'No.'

'Then not another peep out of you.' She fell into a dark silence. He glared at his wife.

'What's the death stare for?' said Ursula.

'It's not a death stare.'

'Why are you so upset?'

'It's nothing. All right? Nothing.'

Last week they had – on Ursula's insistence – finally signed up to the Marriage Course at the church in Onslow Square. For months, Max had resisted. Number one: he suspected it was run by those Alpha Course weirdos. Number two: it would involve revealing personal – and potentially compromising – details of their relationship to complete strangers. Number three: it was fundamentally cheesy.

But Ursula, having softened him up with the fact that the course included a candlelit dinner, had addressed each of his three points in turn. (She had grown used to this with Max.) Firstly, the website stated that there would be no prayers or dogma, and very few mentions of God. Secondly, it said that at no time would participants be required to reveal anything to other members of the group; they had only to reveal things to their spouse, and what could be embarrassing in that? Finally, although she could not deny that the thing would have its share of cheesy moments, wasn't that worth enduring for the sake of their relationship? They both wanted their marriage to work, and it had been under a lot of stress recently. Anyway, all vehicles need a regular service to keep them roadworthy. (A promotional video for the Marriage Course featured a couple taking a camper van to a garage.)

'Bloody traffic,' said Max, 'bloody bastarding M25 traffic on a Sunday evening. Should have known better. Bloody fucking bastard balls.'

'I wonder where we are?' said Ursula.

'No idea,' said Max. 'That's freaking me out as well. I don't even know what junction we're at. We could be anywhere.'

'Why don't you look on the satnav?'

'Out of battery, isn't it? Or have you forgotten?'

'Charge it up, then.'

'What, and die of carbon monoxide poisoning?'

Max turned off the engine, and a profound silence fell. Their future seeped by degrees into the present.

'It'll clear,' said Ursula. 'Just relax until it clears. It's probably a minor incident.' She looked out of the window at the cars stretching into the distance. The end of the queue, where new cars were joining, was out of sight. All around had sprung up a densely populated autopolis. People, people, all nested in their own little cars. People, people, everywhere, and not a drop to drink. Actually, she was thirsty. The children would be OK, they had their beakers. She slid half a bottle of mineral water from the glove compartment, drank some and offered it to Max. He made a sardonic comment about the saliva at the bottom. She shrugged and finished it herself.

'If this goes on much longer, we'll miss the Marriage Course tonight,' she said. 'Miss the first session.'

Max didn't respond.

She remembered their wedding.

One of the bridesmaids, a school friend called Lillian, had become dehydrated throughout the morning and, just as the vows were being exchanged, had fainted. Not uncommon, that. She went down stiffly; the sound of her coiffed head striking the floor resounded through the chapel like a thunderclap. A single flower, Ursula remembered, detached itself from her hair, completed a single revolution and came to rest in the nape of her neck. Ursula hid behind Max's bulk as people clustered around the fallen girl. Max stood his ground, commanded the chapel, made everyone feel that things were under control, until the emergency passed and the ceremony recommenced. It was the sort of situation in which he thrived. He was a manager by training and by instinct, good under pressure; he was six foot two, and broad, imposing; he had the gift of leadership, she knew that; that had been part of what had attracted her to him. This was a man who, even as his own wedding was being

disrupted by forces unseen, could be a rock in the storm. Or so she thought then. Mad Max. She turned the sky-blue lid of the bottle until it closed, and put it – empty and weightless, ridiculous – back into the glove compartment. Max was sitting motionless, looking out of the window.

That world outside the car: did it really exist? That seething landscape of machines, clouds of exhaust, distant fields and trees? The far-off city, in a corner of which the Marriage Course would already be under way? It seemed so remote from here in the Chrysler. Like sitting in a jeep on safari, looking out at another planet. She noticed the silhouettes of people in car windows. Some speaking on their phones, their faces lit up by the screens. Some gazing listlessly into space. One man eating from a packet propped on the steering wheel. There, a couple kissing, they were even kissing. An old lady reading. Some bicycles, like trophy bucks, on the back of a Volvo. A caravan. A lorry painted in supermarket livery – Waitrose? – with a homely slogan on the side that she couldn't be bothered to read. A canoe, upended, on a roof. There was a white van beside them; she couldn't see the driver. She flipped a switch. The doors of the Chrysler responded by locking, simultaneously, with a satisfying clunk. She closed her eyes.