

Lazy Eye

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Extract

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Geoffhurst

Flat 7d

Instead of cats and pilchards from flat 7b the hallway smells of the instant-headache perfume worn by women who get on number 38 buses at West End stops. I shut the street door behind me and take the stairs two at a time, slowing down when I get to the last four because a white girl is sitting on the floor, leaning her back against my bedsit door with a box of half-eaten pizza beside her. Her legs, crossed at the ankle, are blacked out by tights. She is my age, or thereabouts – twenty max, pretending to be older, playing dress-up with a ‘day at the office’ outfit. I drop my sports bag, spread my legs and evenly distribute my weight, but it’s hard to strike a pose with stale sweat from the game on my body. I ignore the urge to lift my arms and sniff my armpits, folding them in front of my chest instead. She stops shuffling my post to pick pepperoni off a wedge of pizza.

‘Can I help you?’ I ask, aiming for polite but intimidating, mimicking my least favourite store detective, the one who is always up my arse, pretending to assist me. She spreads a paper tissue that says Frankies down one side on her lap and drops a crust on to it. She licks three of her fingers, rubs her hands up and down her short woollen skirt and stands up.

‘Nicola Stephens.’ She names her newspaper and extends her hand, dropping it slowly to her side after a few seconds, transforming rejection, as if her offer was a stretch all along. She rests her

head on one side. 'Your mum . . .' She pulls a sad face like a daytime telly presenter switching to world disasters after recipe of the week.

'Excuse me,' I pick up my sports bag, and take a step towards my door. She scuttles to one side.

'Sonny Johnson, your dad. He's due for release.' His name, outside of my head, called by a stranger, makes me flinch. I try to absorb the tagging of his name to mine, but it's as if I'm reading racist graffiti on a bus shelter and have just spotted my name in amongst the insults.

'I'm offering you a chance to tell your story.'

From the pile of identical newspapers I stockpiled nine years back, the only one I didn't leave pre-shredded outside flat 7b for Nutty Shirley's cat trays comes back to me: the winners of the bouncing baby contest on one side of the page, a head-and-shoulders shot of my father on the other. He has the square dimpled jaw I have tried to convince myself belongs only to Clint Eastwood and me. I'm reminded that evil isn't always ugly. It should be – so we can all know what we are up against. The contents of the article have warped with time, leaving one readable word: sorry. Time arcs behind me and backflips; Saturday mornings with the Hulk, sucking Coca Cola cubes until the roof of my mouth bled, chewing black-jacks until my gums were as black as my arse. *Sorry*. A word I use if I step on somebody's toe or leave a watermark on Auntie Harriet's oak table.

I snatch my post from her hand.

'Nah I'll pass.' She has left oily fingerprints on a brown envelope. I try opening my door, but I can't find the keyhole and the metal keeps scratching.

'It's a big story for us. You're looking at a five figure sum.'

An ignition turns over and the engine of a sleek black Saab 900 purrs inside my head. I touch the cream leather seats and smell the walnut wood interior.

'You're looking at concussion if you don't move,' I tell her as my key connects, turns, and lets me in.



I sit on the breakfast bar with my feet on the back of the sofa, listening, hoping to hear footsteps walking away on the other side of the door. I check the soles of my trainers. They're clean but I kick them off anyway, spin on my bottom and dangle my legs in the kitchenette. On the wall above the fridge is a photo of a girl in a hairy coat on the platform of Liverpool Street Station; boxes and a rectangular suitcase hide her feet. She stands next to a ticket collector; the zigzag ribbons in her cornrowed hair are level with the peak of his cap. She runs from the top to the bottom of the photo like a streak of golden syrup. Like a baby after fifteen rounds of peek-a-boo, my reaction refuses to lessen, because something should be done – a letter to the Queen, a reordering of the universe, a petition on Downing Street, a judicial review for people like me, to give us more time, so I coulda known her then, when she was a girl, before she was my mother.

I have other pictures. They're with Auntie Harriet for safekeeping. It's for the best. The past, the future, they need protecting. You owe it to yourself to pay attention to the new memories you're creating. Listen up. Focus. Tomorrow is yesterday soon enough and you don't want to be relying on photographs of dead people. They're tricky and need careful handling. Don't get maudlin, staring at them for long stretches every anniversary. Now and then is better, and even then go easy. Don't exceed five minutes or before you know it your recollections get duller but the photographs get sharper, then they erase your memories, and when they're gone you're fucked because memories don't have negatives. The pattern of a loved one's hair blowing through an open window is vulnerable to fading. The journey of a smile can vanish overnight.

I listen to all the sounds that make up peace and quiet. Just when the calm gets too loud Nutty Shirley shakes a box of cat biscuits and taps the side of a cat food can with a knife. *Here kitty-kitty* she calls, in the kind voice she only uses for animals.

The TV nudges my right hip as I shift positions. I turn it on without the volume and stare at the screen. The muteness demands my attention. I see angry miners. Creatures from *The Black Lagoon* with a third eye on their foreheads. They carry signs; speak in sign language. *Traitor. Scab.* The sky above their placards is dirty. Cut to Maggie Thatcher sitting at a desk with flowers on it. She wears a blue blouse tied at the neck in a bow. She shakes her head from side to side and smiles. She has unmovable hair.

The Saab 900 haunts me. I close my eyes, scared to open them in case there are dollar signs on my eyeballs. Then I remember Mum starching and ironing the clothes she gave to the Red Cross and the Live Aid concert where despite all the starving Ethiopians most of that crowd looked pretty pleased with themselves. I could be charitable – paint the walls of my bedsit yellow to hide the damp before giving it to someone less fortunate. This would be a perfect gaff for a cripple. He could make himself a cup of tea in the breakfast bar without getting out of bed.

The air turns thick and lonely. To slice it up I change the TV channel and raise the volume. *Coronation Street* music wails out. Stan and Hilda are missing from their home and new people are there instead. It doesn't throw me. I remember the dimensions of rooms, the sizes of windows. People get fatter and older but interiors are pretty much fixed. Buildings – they're more stable than people.

Coronation Street is Auntie Harriet's favourite programme. She came to England round about when it started. She's missed eleven episodes since 1961 and knows stuff, like Ken Barlow's mother died

when she was electrocuted by a hairdryer. She talks about the characters as if they're real people. Dolores (Auntie Dolores to me because *a near friend is better than a far relative*), she came to visit in a leopard-skin coat with a collar that stood up under her chin. *Elsie's got one of those*, Auntie Harriet said. And when her next-door neighbour had women's-troubles-down-below I heard her say, *Rita Fairclough suffered with the exact same thing*. I tell her to go on *Mastermind*. She thinks I'm joking. *Look at my face*, I say, *am I smiling?* But she says it's for people who have been to university and done serious studies, which is how they can have Western Europe from AD 400–800 or the life and works of a dead composer as specialist subjects. Besides, it's a bit like *Coronation Street*; they're not keen on black faces. *They're keen on the licence money though*, I tell her.

If we had a normal family and Les Dennis could apply words like 'parents' to me I'd apply for *Family Fortunes*. I would put up with lame sustan jokes and not mind when he asked what my mum fed me on and what the weather was like 'up there'. Getting on the show is easy; you only have to write them a letter. If you are selected you have to stop being yourself and start conforming fast. Just think like the man in the street for thirty minutes and know the top answer when a hundred people are asked a question like, *Name something you can put your foot in*. You can't be smart or funny. Pressing the buzzer and saying *your mouth* or *an awkward situation*, Les, that won't win you a family car or a holiday in the Seychelles. Socks, slippers, shoes; they're the sorts of answers Les is looking for. You have to be average, run-of-the-mill, which I'm not, but Susie is my sister and Jason's my best friend from longtime, so I know how ordinary people think.

The pane of glass in the street door rattles as it slams. I go to put the kettle on and then I lean on the rotting window ledge and look out at the weed-choked garden until the glass panes smear from the boiling water.

I wonder what Auntie Harriet would say if I phoned her and instead of, *Yes I'll be there for Sunday dinner*, I told her I feel like an old biddy on *The Antiques Roadshow* who has just been told the ugly jumble-sale painting in the attic is worth half a million? *Geoffhurst boy*, she'll say, *you don't know jack*. And because she is *sick to the back teeth of listening to rubbish*, and *only interested in sensible conversations* because of all the crap she's heard over the years, she might hang up after that. But I do know. I haven't forgotten. The summer of '76 stands out like a splash of red in a black and white movie. It was hot enough to wonder if government scientists were doing a weather experiment – inventing a fifth season or cranking up the sunshine to kick-start the soap industry. Old people drying up and fading away. Broken-down buses steaming in rush-hour traffic. Cracked clay at the bottom of the River Lea.

I sit on my bed, shift my mug of tea into the other hand and press the button for BBC2. A city-type talks. His words sticking and unsticking. He was a tea trader before he was knocked off his bike when he wasn't wearing a helmet. Now he has head injuries and can't tell how near or far objects are, so he doesn't know where to place his hands when he picks things up. I feel bad for him, being sort of handicapped myself I notice things; like they treat the disabled like shit and when they can't say the old word any more, no matter how much saliva they swallow, they bring in a new one. Negro, coloured, black, I know what I'm talking about. Water on the brain has drained away, the deaf are no longer dumb and I haven't seen a collection box for the Spastic Society since I don't know when. They didn't find a new word for my condition. See I have a lazy eye.

If I were talking to you now I'd be looking right at you but after a while my right eye would wander off, turn out. It looks like an advantage, as if I can see remotest right, almost around corners, like a frog or a rabbit, excepting I can't and it isn't, because people treat

you differently when there is something wrong with you. *There's no flies on you*, the woman in the post office says when I catch her short-changing me when I cash my giro. She's not wrong. I'm the observant type – a lifetime of overcompensation. So I'd sussed Mr Typhoo wasn't right in the head before he spoke. I'd clocked the rich-white-boy wool suit – black, cut just short of tight. He cares about threads. So explain the navy socks. Turns out he doesn't know his wife's name or how many kids he has. An information message for brain-injured people flashes and is gone. Fuck knows how the people with the scrambled brains are supposed to get down the number when there wasn't enough time for a normal person to remember where he put his pen. Poor bastard. I'd be happy to swap, because he wants to remember, and I can't forget.



The light from the television flashes around the room. It's getting chilly so I pull the top bedcovers over myself without getting into bed, not wanting to soil my sheets with my stinking self. I start thinking on crazy people who slacken on their hygiene and sort of understand, because at times of stress there is more comfort in smelling yourself than you might expect.

My stomach growls. I haven't eaten since way before football and I had Jason on my team and worked harder to make sure we won, made sure the need for a scapegoat was eliminated. I picked J second. I've done that since Langley Junior Mixed. Choosing him first risks bum chum taunts, J feels patronized, and I miss out on guys who can play for real. Today he bottled on a dead cert, passed the ball straight back to me without even sizing up the situation, made me wish I'd picked him third. I could've afforded to – he's the worst player and the only white boy so he was hardly going to be snapped up. He has no confidence in his body's ability to perform. *You should have a bit*

more faith in yourself, I told him after the game. *So should you*, he replied.

Jason getting lippy is my own fault. I made the mistake of telling him I was tired of liming on street corners in the summer, daytime TV in the winter. Sick of jobs where after six weeks of written warnings and appraisals with a deputy-section-supervisor in a shit-fabric suit who drew up *way forward* plans, I ended up punching my way to freedom. I was thinking about going into advertising I said – being part of a creative services department. J held it down, but the corners of his mouth twitched so I knew he was pleased. He started testing me to see if I was serious. I had it covered. *Apparently qualifications are not a must. You bring originality and an interest in popular culture and it's not unknown for them to train you on the job.* He wanted me to know that trainee posts don't pay much at the beginning. But like I said, *The dole isn't exactly raking it in.*

Jason has a habit of saying the wrong thing for the right reason, so even when he makes me so angry I lose the power of speech and want to roar and toss him through a window, I hold back until the surge of blood in my ears is a regular stream and I can speak again. That's the time, if I wanted, I could have told him how knackered I was from the effort it took to make up for having someone on my team who lacked the confidence to judge an egg without resorting to an egg-timer.

I do a food inventory without moving – an onion, a Swiss roll, margarine, half a carton of chicken chow mien and milk that doesn't smell bad even though the sell-by date passed two days ago. I could use thick chips and curry sauce from Mrs Wong's, but it's spitting outside and that can be the beginning of stiff rain, and who knows how long I'll have to wait for the chips – long enough for the sky to start rumbling and for black rain to leave everything it touches spoilt and miserable. I rename the cold leftovers Japanese Noodle

Salad (a girl trick I learnt from watching my sister get more pleasure from cheese on toast when she spreads a tissue on her lap, uses a knife and fork and calls it Welsh rarebit), and tuck in, careful not to let my fork touch the foil container, because then it tastes metallic and imagination can take you only so far.

A piece of shredded chicken gets stuck between my two front teeth. I pick at my gum-line with my thumbnail trying to pull the trapped food forward but it's lodged. Memories step out of the shadows innocently asking for a time check before mugging me.

I'm ten years old. My possessions include a broken milk tooth, a very long toe-nail clipping and an *Incredible Hulk* comic that will one day earn me serious money.

I use the corner of a double-glazing flyer to push it through, poke it with the tip of my tongue. I can't leave it alone. Special fried rice from now on. They moved playtime to 2.15 when the sun had stopped blaring, but at 3.30 when school was out, we were still popping blisters on white girls' arms. Fuck Mrs Wong. It's still there niggling. It won't go away.

In the mirror above the kitchen sink I peel my lips back and prise mushed chicken away from the gap with an opened safety pin. When I've picked it clean I smile at myself – not from satisfaction. This is the smile I give to kids when their body weight is being suspended from one lengthening arm, or when they're being shamed or slapped in public places, immediately before I go out of my way to bend down and whisper 'bully' in their mother's shell-like. It's a smile of recognition when all other eyes are studying the sky, or searching for dropped coins for the bus fare home. My lips spread automatically in such circumstances, so I'm not surprised to see the reassurance smile, because if I didn't know better, I'd say the face looking back at me is more than a little scared.