A Little Stranger

Kate Pullinger

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Extract

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ESCAPE

A woman stands on her own beside the baggage carousel. All around her there is noise: people talking, bored and tired after their long flights, the tannoy announcing delays, departures, arrivals, lost passengers, lost bags, the machinery of the long metal conveyer belt starting up and then shutting down again, the soft clunk and slide as yet another bag emerges, people wrestling with their baggage trolleys; if she listened hard enough she would hear, outside the terminal building, the sound of airplanes overhead, their great wings straining, tires meeting the tarmac with short sharp screeches, she would hear the motorized luggage carriers, she would hear the catering trucks, the fuel lorries, she would hear the flight controllers up in their tower talking about what they watched on TV last night. But she hears nothing. She stands alone, in blessed silence. She has no bags to collect, all she carries is her small, well-made leather handbag, but she stays beside the carousel locked into some kind of unthinking repeat behaviour pattern, a race memory of air travel, of all the air journeys she has made in her life. There is no one meeting her, there is no one speaking to her, no one tugging at her dress. She is in a silent room, a white room, a room devoid of clutter; there is a vase of flowers, sunshine, white linen bed sheets — everything clear, everything clean. It is a longed-for space, a dream room, a place where she can be by herself. She is there now. She is free.

The thing is, I'm just not up to it. I'm not capable. I thought I was, of course I did. Everyone does it. Well, most people do it, most women, at least. It's natural, some people say it's a fundamental right; how hard can it be? My own mother did it and did it well, at least initially, until I was eight or so, and those eight years set me up for life. All around me people do it, in conditions far worse than mine: single parents — there's a woman I see in the park who has four kids and she's on her own and they look happy, healthy. Refugees. People who are disabled; people whose kids are disabled; people who have cancer; people who have no jobs and no money and live on benefits in bad housing: they all do it and most of them do it pretty well.

And then there's me.

So I've resolved to do something about it. I'm not sure what, haven't got to that yet. I'm trying to think it through but my powers of independent thought aren't what they used to be. It's got to happen though; things must change. Before something awful happens. Before I can no longer remember how to be happy.

Fran was lying in bed, trying to read a novel.

She couldn't clear her head of what had happened earlier in the day. She'd taken Louis to the shops. They'd gone into the organic supermarket to buy bread. Fran thought she should buy organic — it was better for Louis, it was better for all of them. But they couldn't afford it. Everything cost twice as much as it did elsewhere. And the produce, flown in from the world over — tiny bright orange mangoes from Sri Lanka, dripping papaya from Gambia, fat runner beans from Madagascar — tended to go off if it wasn't eaten right away. This made her wonder about the fruit and vegetables she bought in the ordinary supermarket, lettuce that didn't wilt, tomatoes that lasted forever — were preservatives injected on the vine?

She was buying bread; it was expensive but, Fran thought, superior enough to justify the price. At the organic supermarket, as in any other supermarket, they kept the sweets — organic sweets — near the till. Louis spotted his favourite, strips of dried fruit that were like candied leather. For ages Fran had thought these were good treats to give to Louis, they were made of fruit after all, completely natural; then one day her dentist told her they were worse than chocolates and crisps because of their tendency to adhere to the teeth. So no more fruit strips for Louis. He got up out of his pushchair — the shop was full of stairs that she'd had to lug Louis, the pushchair, and the shopping up and down, in relays — and marched over to the shelf. He pointed, smiled,

and said 'Please'. Fran was counting her coins. She had enough money for the bread, nothing else. She couldn't believe Louis had said please. She was tempted to put the bread back and buy him the sweet instead. But they needed the bread. She needed the bread. So, she said no, there wasn't enough money, and told him to get into the pushchair.

There was a brief lull. Fran paid for the bread and put it in her bag. She turned to face Louis.

He threw himself on the floor and started to wail.

Fran stood absolutely still. She couldn't move; Louis was nothing but movement. He kicked his arms and feet out, suddenly looking surprisingly large. Other customers stepped over him, around him, glancing at Fran, telegraphing disapproval, distaste. One woman actually made that tutting noise. Fran looked away. Louis' tantrums filled her with wonder — the impossible fury of it all. 'Louis?' she said. He screamed more loudly. 'Louis,' she tried whispering, maybe whispering would stun him into submission. He kicked harder, more wildly.

And then she herself was filled with fury, a fury that felt as sudden, and large, as Louis' — Why me? Why now? I can't stand another minute of this. She wrenched the empty pushchair away from where it was parked and walked out of the shop.

The door closed behind her. She could no longer hear Louis. She pushed the chair along the street, past the clothes shops and cafés, down to the newsagent. She parked the pushchair, applied the brake, went inside, and looked at the tidy stacks of newspapers. She looked at the magazines, all those magazines she used to read every month in Celine's, those magazines that used to help her decide who she was, what she looked like, who she might be. Well, she wasn't glossy

anymore. She no longer shopped for clothes, she no longer worked with clothes, and she no longer met up with her girlfriends to talk about these things.

She left the shop and looked at the pushchair. She could leave it there. She was next to a bus stop, any minute now a bus would come along and she could get on it. She could get on the bus and sit down, and look out the window. She could stare out the window in peace. She could be stuck in a traffic jam for hours and hours and it wouldn't matter, she wouldn't care, she'd have no one to be concerned with, apart from herself. She could have a nap, she could file her nails. She wouldn't have to think of Louis. She wouldn't have to cook his tea. She wouldn't have to figure out how to stop him from screaming. She'd be back in control, of her life, of her time. She stood at the bus stop and watched people coming and going from the newsagent, making their way past the pushchair without taking much notice of it.

If a bus comes now, I'll take it.

She looked at her watch without seeing the time.

If a bus comes now, I'll get on it.

The man from the newsagent, an Indian man, a man from whom she'd bought papers many times, for many years, but with whom she'd never exchanged more than a few words, came out of his shop. He lit a cigarette. He looked at her, smiled, and looked down at the empty pushchair. Then he looked up at the sky and said, 'A bit of sunshine. How lovely.' His voice broke through the heavy afternoon air.

'Yes,' said Fran. She took a deep breath. 'Sunshine.' She stepped away from the bus stop, took hold of the handles of the pushchair, released the brake, and pushed it away, back down the street, past the clothes shops and the furniture shops, the antique

dealers, the art gallery and the cafés, and into the organic supermarket.

Louis was sitting on the floor. He had stopped crying. He was eating a fruit strip; someone must have given him one. When she entered the shop, he looked up at her and smiled and said, 'Mummy.' She didn't speak, but knelt down and gathered him into her arms, hugging him tight, then released him and smoothed his hair off his face. He smelled so sweet. He climbed into the pushchair and settled down, ready to be wheeled away, like an Emperor, benevolent ruler of his domain.

Their flat was small. It was on the first floor of a large Victorian house that had been converted in the 1960s. Up one flight on the narrow staircase; two flats above, one below. It was a good flat. Great location, lots of light. They'd stripped the floorboards and knocked down walls and made the kitchen and sitting room into one largish room and modernized the bathroom (white tiles, a shower, opaque glass). They'd spent money carefully. There was one bedroom and a little dressing room off it that now belonged to Louis. It was a small flat, but they were fine in it. They could walk to work. At least Nick could walk to work. Fran was no longer working.

She put down the novel she was trying to read. Louis was asleep in his cot in the next room and he wouldn't, shouldn't, wake up. Nick was at work. She knew she wouldn't be able to go to sleep, it was too early, she was too wound up. I should be used to nights in by myself. I should have invited someone around for a drink. Where are my friends? What's happened to all my friends? I haven't seen anyone for ages. I haven't seen Celine for

at least a month. Celine was Fran's old employer; glamorous, childless, and nearly fifty, she was a Frenchwoman from Aix-en-Provence who had lived in London for many years. She never hesitated to make plain her horror of Fran's new life. 'Can't you get out, darling?' she'd say in her peculiar accent, as though her French vowels were being throttled by her English. 'Can't you slip round to my place?'

'Not tonight, Celine. Another day.'

'Why don't you come back to work for me?' Celine had asked this question a hundred times. 'I need you. The shop needs you. It's not the same without you — you must be bored—'

'I can't. You know I can't. We can't afford it. We can't afford for me to work.'

'Find a childminder, not a nanny, nannies are for the rich, a childminder, they're cheap, aren't they? An au pair. A Polish student. There must—'

'Celine, you don't pay enough for me to be able to afford to work for you. It's as simple as that.'

'There are perks.' Now Celine was insulted.

'Louis can't eat clothes.'

'But it's driving you mad. It's driving me mad watching you go mad.'

Fran didn't reply. What could she say?

Celine thought Louis was adorable; she liked to look at him, although that was as far as she went. Buying him clothes was one of her hobbies; she'd supplied the lavender cashmere BabyGro that had generated so much discussion down at the baby clinic.

But Fran couldn't go out, because she had to stay in. She would telephone Celine instead.

She got out of bed and put on her dressing gown. It was black

quilted silk satin, French from the 1920s, in the style of a kimono. Wrapped up in it, she was warm and sleek. She put on her felt slippers — the very slippers, she thought, that she'd seen featured in a newspaper supplement just last week, chosen by an up-and-coming architect as her favourite design item — and left the bedroom. On the way down the short corridor she banged her ankle against the folded pushchair that was lying on the floor. She swore.

Fran hated the pushchair. She hated the way it dominated her life. She hated the way it ruled out public transport — buses and tube trains were impossible to negotiate. She hated the way it got stuck in doorways, in narrow shop aisles, on rough and uneven pavements. She hated the way that when she entered her favourite café the waiters' smiles faded once they saw what was coming. She hated the way she looked with it — she had become *one of them*, one of those women, harried, hunched, unattractive. Invisible. Some women wield their pushchairs like heavy artillery, flattening anyone who gets in their way. Others bowl along, straight-backed, Mary-Poppins-proud, breezy. Fran alternated — bad days, good days. This was her life now, and there was no getting away from it; the pushchair was necessary. She was as attached to it as it was to her. Just like the child. Louis.

London hates small children, Fran thought, London hates mothers like me. What has happened to me? I never used to be so angry. Or have I always been this way, waiting to blossom, like an enormous evil-smelling bud that opens in the night?

The pushchair usually resided downstairs in the front entrance hall. There wasn't anywhere else to put it, and Fran felt it was okay to leave it folded up and flat on the floor; if she tried to lean

it against the wall it left marks and, inevitably, fell over. The other people who lived in the building didn't like having the pushchair there. 'Why can't you keep it in your flat?' Charlie, the woman downstairs, had asked once again, when Fran came in from her trip to the organic supermarket.

'Well,' Fran said slowly, 'here's how it is. I come into the house,' she demonstrated, miming, 'I've got Louis. I've got the shopping. I take Louis out of the chair and carry him upstairs. I stick him somewhere — in his cot or in his highchair — so that he can't escape and throw himself back down the stairs.'

Charlie smiled at that, Fran thought, malevolently.

'I come back down. I fold up the pushchair. I get the shopping. I carry that upstairs. By then, Louis is shouting. He doesn't want to be confined to his cot, or his high chair.'

'Oh yes,' said Charlie, 'I've heard him.'

'I take Louis out and calm him down. I unpack the shopping, which by then is melting, or spilling, or cracking, or whatever. Oh! Louis needs his nappy changing. Oh! Louis needs a bottle. Oh! I need a cup of tea. Or whatever.' Fran watched Charlie's face. 'By now, I'm too tired to go get the pushchair. I've forgotten about the pushchair. I don't fucking care about the pushchair.'

Charlie frowned.

'Could you bring it up to the flat for me?' Fran asked. 'That would be ever so helpful.'

Charlie grimaced as though in sympathy, and closed the door of her flat. Fran took a deep breath and turned to go up the stairs, Louis balanced on her hip.

The door opened once again. It was Charlie, wearing her art dealer smile, 'You did choose to have this baby, didn't you?'

Fran climbed the stairs without answering.

But later, when Louis was having his nap, she went downstairs and fetched the pushchair.

And now, she picked up the phone and went over to the settee. She and Nick had bought their sofa — dark red velvet upholstery, enormous soft cushions; a sofa big enough to live in, she liked to think — when Fran was still working. The furniture place down the road gave them a substantial discount; most of the local shopkeepers — the independents, not the more recent chains and franchises — helped each other out. Nick and Fran had bought most of what they owned that way. Fran dialed Celine's number and ran her hand along the back of the settee. Now the velvet was splattered with rough patches where Fran had scrubbed away Louis' sick.

'Hello?'

'It's me.'

'You! Hello. Where are you?'

'Where do you think?'

'Come over. Ruth and Jim are here. We're having champagne.'

'I can't.'

'Ooh,' said Celine, annoyed. 'Where's that Nick?'

'Where do you think?'

Fran looked at her watch. She was in her dressing gown and her slippers. It was midsummer, evening. Outside, the sun was still shining weakly.

'If he comes home early, my darling, come around and have a drink. We'll be at it 'til late.'

'Okay,' Fran said. She put the phone down and found herself close to tears.

She walked back into the bedroom. She sat down on the bed. She took a tissue and wiped her eyes. There was nothing to cry about. There was no point in crying. Charlie downstairs was right. They had chosen to have a baby. She had been out nearly every night between the ages of sixteen and thirty, she'd had enough nights out to last several lifetimes. Louis was more than a year and a half, he'd be two in the autumn, things were getting easier. He was a good sleeper. He had a good appetite. He had a reliable routine, regular naps, happy bathtimes. He was interested in books, toys, other children. He was a cheery soul, easy to take care of, apart from the tantrums. They'd been happening for about three months now. Fran couldn't decide if they were getting better, or worse. But it was not something to worry about, she knew, it was just a phase, one of many. She needed to learn a few more anti-tantrum tricks, that was all, and, more importantly, she needed to remember to use them.

Motherhood, for Fran, was surrounded by darkness. In the early days the darkness arose from lack of sleep; later it was deepened by loneliness. It was as though a bright hard white light shone down on her little family, Fran, Nick, and Louis, but outside of that ring of light — nothing. She tried peering into the dark when she was having a hard time, when she was tired, and when she needed help. She even tried calling out into it sometimes. 'Hello? Anybody out there?' But there was never any reply.

I would not have guessed that being a mother could be so boring. If I'd been asked what I thought it would be like (and I wasn't, of course, why would anyone ask me that?) I would not have said 'Boring'. But everyone who has done it knows there is a special tedium in caring for a small child, in the endless repetition of

small yet vital tasks: feeding, changing, dressing, face-wiping, bathing, comforting, waking, sleeping. The absolute dependency that can feel both mind-numbingly inevitable and compellingly absorbing. And all of it completely inescapable.

Of course I love Louis, there is no question about that. I carried him inside my body for months, I gave birth to him, and he is a thing of beauty, with his flawless baby skin, his soft hair, his warm sticking-out tummy, his clean milky breath, his giggle. Every day he makes me laugh, every day seeing his face fills me with pleasure, every day he grows and changes. And he loves me as well, there's no doubt about that, with an awesome and consuming ferocity. There used to be a cartoon in the newspaper about an ordinary couple who'd given birth to an enormous baby, a baby as big as their sitting room. I didn't much like it at the time, but now I recall it and find myself thinking, yes, he is tiny but he occupies every corner of my life. How can something so small be so gargantuan?

And I am a rubbish mother. I know I am a rubbish mother. I know because I— ; I just know. Every day brings with it some new kind of failure: a tantrum that I failed to deal with properly, a demand — for sweets, perhaps — given into, an argument with Nick, brought on by fatigue. How hard can it be, taking care of a child? But I've discovered that nothing is simple. Nothing is easy.

I didn't have a temper before I had Louis. I can count the number of times I yelled at people before I had a baby; I used to shout at my mother when I was a teenager, and I shouted at my sister Sarah when we were kids. But apart from that, no one. Now I shout all the time. I shout at Louis when he has his tantrums, when he cries and shouts at me; 'Stop shouting!' I shout, 'Stop

shouting!' I shout at Nick, well, pretty much all the time. I'm a rubbish mother, and I'm a lousy wife. It is awful, it is truly appalling, to do something so badly while being bored by it at the same time. And yet, that's my life. That's it. That's me.

Fran had tried, from time to time, to discuss it — what? this unnamed, unspoken, unspeakable, overwhelming feeling of failure, of failing every day, over and over again — with Nick. He couldn't do it. It wasn't that he didn't understand what she was saying, but, he said, there were some things that should simply not be discussed. There were some things that you were not allowed to say. End of conversation. Fran was shocked by his reticence; there had never been anything they couldn't talk about before. I need to talk about it, she wanted to say, maybe if I talk about it, it will go away. But they didn't. And it didn't. Instead they mostly talked about when — if — she would go back to work.

Fran remembered a conversation they had, not long after Louis was born. She was sitting on the red velvet settee. She had spent nearly an hour feeding the baby, propped up with a pillow behind her back, two pillows supporting Louis. He had finally fallen asleep — he had been awake and fretful all day, since early morning, not sleeping for more than ten minutes at a stretch. She put him into his moses basket on the floor next to the settee, tucked him up with a clean white blanket. His sweet elfin sleeping face. Nick brought Fran a cup of tea. He was making her something to eat — he had to go back out to work in half an hour. He flopped down beside her and gave her a hug. Her left nipple was cracked and bleeding, her stitches hurt, her back was still haunted by an epidural ache. She was at least two stone —

nearly thirty pounds — overweight. She sighed heavily, and let her husband hold her.

The baby woke up and began to scream, as though someone had come into the room and shaken him.

Fran burst into tears.

Nick picked up Louis — still scrawny and floppy, wrinkled and spotty, like a bag of frozen peas that had decided to fight for life — put him on his shoulder and tried to comfort him. It didn't work. Louis roared. He wanted Fran, he wanted her milk. But she couldn't bear the thought of feeding him yet again. When she was pregnant a friend had told her to massage her nipples with lanolin cream, in order to get ready for breastfeeding. 'Toughens them up,' she said. It didn't work. Fran's advice for pregnant women, advice that she would have willingly doled out had she been asked, was this: Try sandpaper, for a more realistic preparation.

Nick looked at Fran; she hadn't drunk her tea, she hadn't had a bath, she hadn't eaten her supper. But he didn't know what else he could do, apart from hand her the baby. How could a baby — a tiny, wee baby — render them both so incompetent?

Their problem, Nick thought, was they had no one to call. There was no one to lend a hand. Nick's parents were dead — his mum of breast cancer five years ago, his father of lung cancer two years before that. Nick's brother Robert was something in the City — a stockbroker or an insurance broker, Nick wasn't certain which. Being brothers didn't mean they had anything in common, and they spoke rarely, Christmas, birthdays. Nick's grandparents had been very present when Nick was a child; they lived in a flat around the corner and Nick's grandmother had taken care of Nick and Robert when their mother went out to

work. But his grandparents were long dead as well. Fran's parents and only sibling were in Canada, thousands of miles away. There were no cousins nor aunts nor uncles. They had plenty of friends but they were either childless and uncomprehending or too busy with their own families. We are a nuclear family in the truest sense, Nick thought; a nuclear family about to go nuclear. Atomized.

Fran was still weeping. Not voluably, her shoulders weren't shaking — she was too tired for that. Just tears, running down her face.

And that's when she said it. She opened her mouth and out it came.

'We've made a mistake.'

Nick looked at his wife sharply. She saw that his face was grey with fatigue but he had on his dark green suit and he'd managed to iron a shirt and polish his shoes. He looked good, apart from his skintone and the bags under his eyes. He gave Louis — who had stopped howling but continued to shudder with huge after-sobs — a pat on the back.

'We've made a mistake.'

'You're not allowed to say that.'

But she had said it, and for that moment it was what she believed. They weren't cut out for parenthood. It was too much to expect. The baby took too much away from them, from Fran, from Nick. Not the baby, not Louis himself, but his existence. The very fact of his being alive. She didn't know what to do with him, how to stop him from crying. She wanted to send him back to where he came from, wherever that might be. She wanted her old life returned to her, intact.