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An Accident Waiting to Happen

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I

My friends tell me that if I'm so keen to be a writer then I should get out more and go see the world. What good does it do me to sit at home with a typewriter all day? Surely I'd learn more about life if I actually set about living it a little?

Well, I say to them, if I lived the lives I see others live there'd be no time left to write about it. This is disappointing for my friends – both of them – who obviously believe that as a writer I should be living life to the full. (What do they want – for me to take off to Nicaragua? Pick coffee? Would that help defeat the Contras? Or make me a better writer?) I see so much from this chair that I'd be crazy to go looking for more. It's scary out there. I can't even make up my mind if I should be buying or boycotting South African oranges – which is the more likely to end apartheid? I have enough going on in my own world, thanks; at least this way I manage to maintain some form of control.

Already I see enough, often I see too much. I certainly hear too much. I hear John and Sarah upstairs kicking the shit out of each other – but mainly John kicking the shit out of Sarah. I hear Sarah scream, Stop, you're hurting me! and I hear John continue to slap her about. Punch her, I mean. What do I do? Nothing – I don't

know what to do. You see, even in my own tiny little world, I never know what's best. Am I supposed to leave them be – like almost every other time – or is this going to be the time when it goes too far? Would I be thanked for interfering, or would even Sarah herself tell me to mind my own business?

Though it is my business: I can't sleep for their fighting and Caitlin is physically sick at the violence. I lie in bed while she throws up in the bathroom.

'Make them stop!' she shouts, but I don't know how. I know how strong John is; maybe I don't know it as well as Sarah does right now, but I know he's a big guy. If it came to a stand-off then I wouldn't have a chance. Though John is about my height, and not particularly well built, you can see at a glance that his job as a stonemason has made his body as hard as the material he works with. Our son Tomas once had us all laughing by trying to lift John's bag of tools off the ground; I'm not sure I could lift it any easier yet the weight barely registers with John as he flings the bag across his back.

Should I call the cops? Could I bring myself to call the cops and, if I did, would they have the power to do anything? John and Sarah are married now and this puts Sarah outside the protection of the law – so long as John hits her quietly. Carry on, but don't create a disturbance. Maybe John should gag Sarah and then we wouldn't hear her scream? Caitlin called the cops on them once and that made John think twice – but only twice – and normal service soon resumed. He was trying to kick in the front door because Sarah had locked him out and

we had to listen at first to the pleading, and then the threats, and then the assault against the door. Caitlin and I lay there in the darkness, hoping and praying that this would be the time when John was finally gone for good, but Sarah gave in and opened the door. The cops arrived over an hour later and their lecture to John and Sarah was all about noise and disturbing the neighbours, as though this was the point. They weren't around later to hear the dull thumps: Sarah paying the price for locking John out.

It was Caitlin who first told me what a husband could do to his wife, if not with the full blessing of the law then at least with the law powerless to stop it. I know things are changing, now we're in the middle of the enlightened eighties, but there's still some way to go. When Caitlin told me what Imran did to her, I couldn't walk through the streets of Rusholme without hating every Paki in sight. I blamed them all for what he'd done to Caitlin. Of course, hating Pakis didn't get me anywhere and now I have John upstairs to show how it takes all sorts.

So, you see what I mean about never knowing what to do? Caitlin does – she comes through from the bathroom, bangs on the ceiling with the heel of a shoe and shouts for them please to stop. She's living through each and every sound they make. Her shouting seems to have an effect. Perhaps the realization that we can hear every smack gives John pause before hitting her again – some feeling of guilt perhaps, though I doubt it. Either way, he stops, and we can try to get back to sleep.

Caitlin is returning to work tomorrow after being off sick for a week.

Sarah tries to make light of it when I see her in the morning.

'Aren't you going to ask me why I'm wearing sunglasses?' Her kids cling on to her legs as she hangs out her washing. 'The things we have to put up with as neighbours, eh?'

Yeah, yeah, I think, until he hits you again tonight. Believe me, Sarah, I don't need to ask; I hear everything from this typing chair, I hear it all. I just don't know what to do about it.

When Caitlin and I return to the clinic at the hospital for what turns out to be the last time, we're surprised to be seen first by a social worker. I guess this is a giveaway but at the time it just seems odd – social workers are a part of other people's lives, not ours. Not that anything much comes of it. Inane questions like, 'How do you think you would feel?' don't do much for me.

'It would destroy me,' says Caitlin.

I look up and across at her, not understanding why she'd even answer this stranger, let alone tell her how she'd feel. I evade the woman's questions; I haven't figured out yet how I'd feel – haven't even figured out what I'm supposed to be figuring out – so I'm not about to start sharing it with some social worker.

'You weren't so nice to that woman,' Caitlin says, once we've been left alone.

'Well, how the fuck should I know how I'd feel?'

'Maybe we're about to find out,' says Caitlin.

The doctor's much better than the social worker; this couldn't be easy for her. Turning first to Caitlin's file, she outlines what we already know. This is reassuring and easy to follow.

'When it comes to any possible side effects your infection may have had,' she says to Caitlin, 'you'll be glad to hear that this has completely cleared up. There's no damage to the womb and absolutely no reason why you shouldn't have children. The pain you're in at the moment is a different matter, but we can sort that out now we know there's nothing else wrong with you.'

She turns to my file and uses the same trick, repeating what I know to put me at my ease.

'You had an operation when you were twelve and we thought this might well have affected the fertility of your sperm.'

Yes, go on.

'Well, I doubt if the operation itself did any harm, but the fact you had it so late probably did. In fact, the results of your semen analysis show that your sperm count is so low as to be virtually negligible. This would explain why Caitlin has not become pregnant.'

'Yes, it would,' I say.

Fuck! We didn't even come to the doctor for this. This started with Caitlin being in so much pain each month and now we're here being told we're not to have children?

'I'm sorry,' says the doctor.

'Yes,' I say.

I'm thinking back to being twelve, listening to a doctor telling my parents to wait; telling them it was best to let nature take its course. Well, nature was taking its course all right but not in the way we expected. I mention this to the doctor here at the hospital.

'Yes, that was medical opinion at the time but now we know better. I'm sorry.'

Caitlin is crying, I can see Caitlin crying by my side.

'Even if they'd operated earlier,' continues the doctor, 'the damage would already have been done.'

The doctor's a good doctor. She doesn't baulk at telling us the bad news and her manner lets us know she understands just how painful this will be. But she doesn't let us dwell – she points out that unlike some couples we're lucky to have Tomas, Caitlin's five-year-old son from her marriage to Imran. There are other options open to us; this isn't the end of the story. Take a breather, she's saying, and then let's see how we go on from here. Somehow I get Caitlin out of there and home.

They say accidents can happen but I don't know.

Take Leta for instance. There she is driving along, oblivious to the Greater Manchester Transport bus that's about to send her all the way to Stepping Hill Hospital. She pulls up to the red light and it's as though she's waiting for the accident to happen. It's long past midnight and this usually busy junction is deserted but for Leta's sexy little Mini – and, of course, our late-night bus service. Leta turns to Maria, her mother, in the passenger seat but Maria is fast asleep. Leta looks in the

rear-view mirror to catch her boyfriend's eye and sees instead the fast approaching bus, brmm brmm, pull up to the bumper baby, and then it's happened. The bus just ploughs through them, sending the Mini spinning across the carriageway. As it hits the opposite kerb, the car flips over on to its roof and travels for a further fifty yards along the road, sparks flying, lighting up the dull wet night. The car catches the railings running along the side of the carriageway, flips again on to the wheels, and spins into the path of a car travelling in the opposite direction. Then it's back once again, hard against the railings before finally coming to a stop.

The driver of the second car is experienced and he manages to not overcompensate. The wing of his car is badly damaged but he's OK. He runs back to the mess in the road and watches the rear-lights of the bus disappear into the distance. Leta's mother is lying in the road; she's not going far and she knows it. This kind of thing has happened to her before and right now she's happy to be alive. She understands the nature of accidents; she understands that these things just happen. She can hear Leta screaming but can't lift her head off the pavement to look at her. She wishes she could tell her daughter, tell Leta, it's useless to scream: this thing has happened, why not let it be?

Leta's boyfriend, Mike, could quite as easily have been the screamer but Leta's got in there first and this calms him down. Ex-boyfriend, rather – they both know it's over between them so it's doubly unfortunate that this should happen now, tonight of all nights. Earlier in the

evening, she had finally admitted that she'd been seeing someone else for months, a guy called Sutcliffe. Mike didn't know which was worse: being told, it being someone with such a wank name, or having to share a lift home with Leta and her mother. And now this?

Mike looks around to see there's no back window, that there's no back anything to the car any more. Although he started the journey in the back seat, he's now sat next to Leta in the seat left vacant by Maria. In the limited space he has, he turns, grabs hold of Leta's hair, pulls it back and – smack – hits her hard across the face. This shuts her up long enough to see the blood pouring from his ear and then she's off again. Mike knows he's not too badly hurt, but he is worried about the smell. Petrol and metal; he remembers the sparks from a lifetime ago and is none too keen on hanging around. Leta's screaming is driving him nuts; she's not even hurt he can't help but notice. How like Leta to be the least hurt and make the most noise. He slaps her again.

Shut the fuck up, can't you?

Mike squeezes through the jagged edges of glass and metal to the cold damp air outside. He finds his feet on the wet tarmac and realizes he's lost a shoe. He's not worried about the glass in his feet; they'll sew everything up at the hospital and besides, this isn't really happening to him. He just wants to be away from that car, away from that smell. Who'd have thought the intestines of a car could smell so bad? He reaches in for Leta and, none too gently, pulls her by the arms through the gap. By

the time he has her out safely he's had just about enough of her.

Where the fuck is Sutcliffe now? Mike asks, as he dumps Leta on the ground. He doesn't say the words though and he knows he's going to have to go through the motions of caring for her one last time. Is it always like this at the end of something? He crosses over to where Leta's mother is lying in the road. The other driver is stood over her and they agree she can't be moved.

'She's beautiful,' says the driver strangely.

'Yes,' says Mike and returns to Leta. This is how they are when the ambulance arrives to take them to the hospital. (Meanwhile, the bus driver has gone on to enjoy an orgy of accidents as he makes his way back to the depot. He's angry at being given a night shift at such short notice and pissed out of his mind. When the police finally catch up with him, he really hasn't a clue about the damage he's done.) Back at the hospital, Mike is playing his role to perfection because he knows it's for the last time: the boyfriend – he's even referred to once as the boyfriend. Leta is calmer now and regrets that Mike is involved.

Thanks for looking after me, her look says to Mike, but he's past it. He's here for the night and he'll do what he must but then that's it, he's getting out. Leta knows this and is still grateful. Everyone is so kind (aren't they always?) and when she hears that her mother will be OK she smiles a thank you to the nurse and falls asleep.

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It doesn't take long for the results of the tests to damage Caitlin. The immediate effect is as though a car has crashed in her mind. She staggers around, deafened and in a daze. I walk into the kitchen and she's hacking a loaf of bread with a knife, the whole loaf.

'Caitlin? What are you doing?'

She looks down at the knife in her hand, at the slices of bread. For a second I see her grip tighten and then she drops the knife and walks out past me. I begin to pack away the bread, but she comes back into the room and sweeps everything on to the floor with her arm.

'You just don't get it, do you?' she screams and walks out again.

I pick up the bread and put it in the bin. I put the knife in the sink for washing but then I remember it's dangerous to leave a knife lying around. I wash and dry the knife and replace it on the rack.

I want to protect Caitlin from what this is doing to her but I'm the one doing it. From now on everything she thinks, says or does is determined by the fact that we're not going to have children together. She knows immediately how she feels, she knows what it all means and lays herself open to it all. She said, when that social worker first asked, that this would destroy her and now I can see she was right. How can she live in this way? She lives through things as though they're really happening and not just some accident that will pass. For Caitlin, there's no escaping the crash. She doesn't share my accident mentality.

What does she want? Does she want me to scream?

Like all the best accidents, there's no way to avoid this and no way to prevent it – so what else is to be done? I don't know what to do so I just keep quiet. I must be driving her crazy. It doesn't seem real at all, like a novel – *The Sun Also Rises*, maybe – or the movies. I'm glad I don't live through life any more, glad I don't actually have to live through things as they happen. I much prefer it this way.

'Aren't you bitter?' she asks and I don't know who or what to be bitter about. When Camus' Outsider says, 'Mother died today', I reckon that that just about covers it; what else is there to say? If something bad happens or something good, then it's immediately obvious whether it's bad or good. I don't know of any better words to use. I'm no use when it comes to the next step, a bit slow, if you like, at grasping any further consequences. I wasn't always this way – I don't know where I heard or when I learned that words are no good. Words are useless and never match up to what I really want to say. I could say things like 'I love you' but I could be lying. It's not that I don't want to say the words and not that I wouldn't mean them if I did; it's just, how can I use words at a time like this? I don't understand what's happening; I don't understand what has been done to me. And at the same time, Caitlin wants to hear the words and when she doesn't, well, what is she to believe?

'Do you ever think of Leta?'

Caitlin asks me this as I come through from Tomas's

bedroom. I've just finished putting him to bed and I'm looking forward to an early night in preparation for Caitlin returning to work tomorrow. I have a feeling, just a feeling, that maybe things are closing in on normal; that maybe we can beat this thing together, the three of us. It's been a tough week and we have hard times ahead, but I believe we can get through it. This is where I'm at – Caitlin is elsewhere. So she asks me the question and I'm clueless as to where it's going. As I said, a little slow.

'I suppose so, yes,' I say.

'And what do you think about her?' As I turn to Caitlin I can see she's crying. This has happened so much in the past week that it's difficult to comfort her, however callous that may sound.

'Don't cry,' I say.

'You're going back to her, aren't you?'

'To Leta?'

'I read your diary.' This doesn't make any sense. I've written no such thing in my diary because I have no diary to write things in. I write shopping lists on scraps of paper and reminders to myself of places to be for Tomas.

'The diary you keep in your drawer,' says Caitlin. 'I read it today while you collected Tomas from school. I know it was wrong but I did it anyway. I'm sorry.'

'But that diary's three or four years old!'

'Then why do you still keep it?'

I don't know the answer to this. I like the idea of knowing where I was and what I was doing over a period of time. I've only kept a diary – a detailed diary – at one

time in my life and that was about three years ago, when I first started seeing Leta. I'd known her when she was with Mike but had lost touch when they separated. It was also the time of my first serious attempt to make it as a writer. When I went to throw the diary away recently, I had one last look and chose to keep it. It could have been over any three months; it wasn't what was written that I liked but the owning of a full three months that I'd never forget. I'd like the same for every moment I've been on the planet.

'What did she have that I don't?' asks Caitlin.

Oh Christ, I'm watching the crash as it happens. Caitlin is at the centre of the accident and there's nothing I can do. I can't prevent it from happening. When is an accident not an accident? When you're in it.

I can hold her. I do hold her. But I can't stop her living through it. I could say things like, 'Don't be silly', but I could be lying.

'Don't be silly,' I say.

Caitlin believes I'm waiting for an opportunity to leave her and Tomas. This isn't rational; this is Caitlin living through the crash. Surely she has more reason to leave me and find someone else while I cling on to Caitlin and Tomas for all they're worth? But Caitlin believes I shall leave her and Tomas and go back to Leta. She believes these things and they are as real to her as if they were already done. Every fear has become a possibility to Caitlin – no, a certainty – and it's killing her. I hold her and I try to reassure her, but it will take time for her to feel safe again.

Already the past is bleeding into the present. I don't want Leta back in my life. I want what I have here now.

'I'm going to bed,' I say.

Caitlin is being destroyed and all I want to do is to sleep. Things we have had no control over have brought us to this and now all I would like is to sleep. Oh, and for things to be better when I wake.

But, of course, it doesn't happen like that – instead we have the John and Sarah show playing upstairs and Caitlin being sick in the bathroom.