

issue 26

streetcake



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laura chester

Dear Sir or Miss

*

Remember me? I ~~fink~~ think you can.
I appleyed for the job of librairean.
You sed I carnt reed, but as you can sea,
I can ~~right~~ write perfectley.
You turned me down, I don't no why,
Its ok, I've other fish to frie.
My daddy says you wont be going to
heven,
Yours sincerly,
Malcom

dane cobain

Even Dogs Die Miserable

They were walking the dog
when the train came.
Off its lead, it chased the metal
giant as it pitter-pattered
through suburbia.

At the crossing,
dog stopped
looking confused
and she waited as well,
unsure –
if she moved,
she died.

The moving metal hammered on
and at that last second
the dog jumped under the train
like a suicide, only inhuman.

Meanwhile,
unaware of the shattered bone
and bloody wreck beneath them,
two hundred commuters worried about
rent dinner death tomorrow.

The dog didn't die
immediately,
it just lost its paws
and sprayed blood
like a pierced artery.
She screamed,
'oh my god oh my god oh my god',
and cradled the dying
animal –
it stared vacant and unseeing
at its mistress,
licked feebly at her tears.

They took it to the vet
in the back of a once-white van,
now red, dirty and deathly –
they put it out
of its misery.

It took her two days
to wash away the blood,
and she still hears him barking
in the night-time.

nikki dudley

extract from Semblance

Chapter 1 (0.5 days)

22:32

As if losing Daniel wasn't enough. Yet, we ~~could've~~ could've moved on. We could have pretended we were all okay. But now Thom is hurt and he might even die. It feels so wrong to write that.

Although, why am I writing anything at all? That's why I think things have changed. It's as though somewhere inside of me, I know I will need to look back at these notes one day and remember the moment when our family changed forever.

The waiting room is cold. The tea in his hands has hardly helped at all. It is tepid at best and stone cold at worst.

22:45. He's been in and out of this room for three hours, taking time to check on Thom, take a piss and talk to Mum in the corridor.

A stab wound to the stomach – that's a lot of blood lost. And beyond that, his cousin seems to have suffered something so traumatic that he can't even begin to understand it. What led Thom to do it? And can they ever bring him back?

It isn't unexpected, he supposes.

When Daniel threw himself in front of that train six weeks ago it shocked them all. Richard hasn't even had time to think about it properly, and now Thom has hurt himself, leaving him to pick up Mum. How could his family be in such ruins?

Suddenly, Richard is not alone anymore.

A man comes in and introduces himself as Michael. He doesn't even knock. He just walks in as if it's a decent time to disturb someone's thoughts. Richard has never met the guy before. He is a sensible looking man with an uncomfortable fuzz of stubble. Richard guesses he hasn't allowed himself not to shave in a very long time.

He explains he is Alice's brother. Richard asks him who Alice is and he says, "Sarah".

So, he has been right not to trust her.

She had been staying in their house for the last four weeks or so, with Thom defending her more and more as time went on. And now he is being told she lied about her name, she has been ill for a long time, she is sorry for lying to them all.

And most of all, Thom is missing.

Who the hell cares about that strange woman or whatever she decides to call herself if Thom is missing? She is only important if she was involved with the stabbing, which isn't bloody unlikely.

Michael seems genuinely concerned. He says he can't find Alice either. Maybe they're together? He asks Richard, as though he might know.

"Look, I don't have a clue. I need to find Thom." He shrugs off Michael's questions. What a waste of time it is standing in this dark room with the brother of that liar.

Yet as Richard reaches the door, there's a knock. He opens it and sees a policeman standing there.

"Richard Mansen?" he says, reading from his notepad.

"Yes," he agrees, still pulling his jacket on. It's cold outside. Richard guesses that if no-one can find the injured Thom in the hospital, he must've made a run for it.

"I'm sorry. I need to look for Thom," he pushes past the officer.

"Mr Mansen, that's *our* job," the man tells him, almost sulkily.

Richard turns back to him. "Well, you're not doing that too well, are you?"

He continues down the corridor, wondering where to start.

He supposes he shouldn't have been so dismissive of the policeman, but since Daniel's death he's found himself a little more suspicious of them in general. They'd taken ages to follow-up after his death and even then, they just said something like "open and shut case". Daniel was just some suicidal loser to them.

Although, it is clear now that it wasn't 'open and shut'. There is a reason that Thom decided to turn a knife into himself in that room with Sarah, or *Alice*, if that's the name she wants to go by these days. He'd suggested as much to Thom when they'd last seen him and argued about the strange way he was acting. Now he is missing and Richard will never get to apologise for asking him to leave.

Losing his brother and cousin in the space of six weeks – what a pile of shit. And now he has to be some kind of detective, does he?

He looks around the floor that Thom was on but finds nothing. There are a few nurses rushing around, clearly panicked that they have lost one of their patients. Richard ignores them and moves on. He goes downstairs in the lift, which seems to take forever with patients transferring in and out, and finally arrives in the lobby.

Outside, he walks up and down in front of the entrance, pacing. Nothing. He walks around the drop off bays, avoiding the ambulances pulling in. Nothing.

He walks between the cars in the car park and only finds Michael again. He is cradling the woman he calls Alice, the one Thom trusted more than he trusted Richard before he disappeared, perhaps.

He wonders if she could've tried to kill Thom. Is she crying out of guilt or loss? Whatever happened before, seeing her being heaved upwards by her brother makes him sure that she has no idea where Thom is now. He quickly turns away and pulls his collar up before they can recognise him, walking back towards the hospital.

It is only when he stands in the entrance watching an ambulance pull up without sirens or lights that he realises. In his mind, he believes Thom is already dead.

Chapter 2 (Yellow bruises)

I have no idea about you when I leave the hospital.

Thom is gone and this is all I am thinking about, struggling towards the car, leaning on Michael. I am cold, so cold I can't feel my fingers anymore. Even the bandages make no difference.

I guess you hardly exist yet. In the days and weeks to come, you will start to grow and I'll realise that I have to be sane again. It shouldn't be as easy as that, but when the doctor tells me the news one month later, it feels that easy. Sanity – yes. Madness – no.

In the car driving back from the hospital, Michael asks me whether I love Thom. I look across at him, tears still burning my eyes, whispering, "I never told him."

It isn't a yes but it answers the question.

Michael doesn't ask me about Thom after this journey. He only brings him up when he has too, usually when I do. Generally, he tries to blank out the man who nearly broke his nose, who accused him of being a rapist because of my lie, who was on the verge of killing his sister in that bedsit. He doesn't think I deserved to die. He's wrong though. I don't say it because I never want to tell him about Daniel and how his eyes stared straight through me when I pushed him in front of that train.

"Michael, can I stay with you for a while?" I ask him as he stops at the lights.

He smiles, sleepily. "Ali, don't be stupid," he scolds me playfully, squeezing my knee. I have an urge to tell him to call me 'Sarah' again. However, I realise it will never work. He will always call me Alice or Ali. I can't reinvent myself, even though I believed I could while I stayed at the Mansen house.

"Michael, I'm sorry about everything," I say quietly.

"What are you sorry for?" He glances over but has to look back at the road quickly.

"For what happened with Thom. Your nose. The horrible incident today."

"Look, I'm just glad *you* didn't get hurt..." Michael's voice wavers.

I don't deserve this unconditional love at all. He should feel angry at me, for the past two years – about Mum, the times in the hospital, how I lied to him and ran away from him, how I put my obsessions with Thom and Daniel first.

"I should've been the one," I admit, biting my lip.

"What?"

Michael nearly drops his hands for a moment but remembers he's supposed to be driving and instantly grabs the wheel tight.

"What are you talking about?"

"I should've gotten hurt, not Thom."

I start sobbing again. I cry myself to sleep for about two weeks after I lose Thom. This is only the beginning.

Michael pulls over to the kerb and stops the car. He turns to me, his features seemingly bursting out of his face as though he no longer has control of them. His eyes are bulging, his mouth hanging open, his cheeks are flushed. The bruises around his face are only slightly yellow now and you can barely see them unless you know what happened. I can still see them though. And maybe I will never be able to see his face without them.

Although, his yellow bruises also remind me of the moment we found each other again. Amidst all the madness and confusion, we were together again, as brother and sister. I think it's that moment that seals it. My new colour will be yellow. I will try to keep away from red – the colour that made me follow Daniel and push him to his death.

It's worth a try anyway.

"Don't you *ever* say that..." he takes my bandaged hands and squeezes them, adding "okay?" I bite my lip at the pain but don't say anything.

I stare into his face through the blistering of tears and feel myself nodding, although I don't agree.

"You are my sister and I love you, Ali. We can take care of each other now," he reassures me. He kisses my damaged hands like a rejected suitor. I pull them away from him, clasping them together weakly in my lap.

"I don't know what's going to happen," I moan. The windows are misting up from the heat and the tears in this tiny space. What I mean to say is "I don't know what to do with the rest of my life". No Mum, no Thom, no memories. I have lost myself in the obsession and madness. How can I build something out of the shards of the person I once was?

"We'll sort something out," Michael looks towards the windshield as rain starts to plummet onto it, and then faces me again. "Together."

What a beautiful word. *Together*. I had believed Thom and I would be together only a short time ago. And now I am alone and Thom is lost in the infinite possibilities of London or maybe the UK, the world, or death even...

Although, I am not alone really. There is Michael. And there is you.

Chapter 3 (1 day)

07:06

Thom still missing. Searched the hospital and the local area. No sign. Where is he? Is he dead?

Richard is standing in the afternoon sun by the entrance to the hospital when a hand touches him on the shoulder.

He turns round to see Mum standing there, shivering, despite the growing April sun. It's far from warm, but he doesn't think he's seen her stop shaking since they arrived at the hospital yesterday. He sped through the streets ten minutes after receiving her phone call, picked her up from the house and carried on speeding towards Thom.

But, Thom hadn't stayed long. They had watched through a window as the doctors rushed around his bed, only seeing glimpses of his still face amidst the chaos.

Later, they had sat by his bed for a few hours, hoping he would open his eyes. He didn't. He obviously waited until they had both left him for a mere few minutes and had taken his opportunity to escape them forever.

Where the hell is he now? Richard wishes he knew so he could cuddle Mum and whisper in her ear that everything is okay and mean it. At the moment, he can't say anything of the kind.

He takes her into his arms anyway, smelling the last twenty-four hours of tears and desperation like the strong stench of someone who is unwashed.

"Are you okay?" he asks, squeezing her. She locks her arms around him.
"I'm as okay as I can be."

"How are you?" she counters.

She pushes back from him and looks into his face. He imagines his eyes look as heavy and bloodshot as hers. His hair is stuck up in different positions from attempting to sleep in an uncomfortable wooden chair. Suffice to say, they'd probably only slept for about four hours between them.

"I'm fine Mum." He leans against a wall and yawns widely. "I think we should go home though..." he trails off, swallowing loudly.

"We're giving up already?" she asks him, staring at the floor. He takes her hands.

"We've stayed the night here. The police and us have searched the grounds – I don't think he's here. And if he's gone, he won't come back here. He may not even be able to, the state he's in." She nods as he speaks but keeps her head down.

"I know you're right," she says quietly. "I know you're right," she repeats more firmly.

"We need some rest. We won't be any use to Thom this way anyway. We can go home, rest a bit and then start looking for him again. Who knows, he might be looking for us at home and we're not there..." It's a lie but Richard feels it's necessary. They are both dead on their feet and he knows he has to make Mum go home.

"Okay Richard... *okay*." She is quiet for a moment.

"Do you think he's still alive?"

Richard lets this question absorb into his brain. "Of course," he answers slowly. "Of course Thom is alive," he repeats, trying to convince himself. Yet his words feel hollow in his mouth.

"Richard, I want to be honest with you. I want to make sure I don't make the same mistakes with you," Mum says suddenly. She is staring out into the car park, seeming not to focus on anything in particular.

"What do you need to be honest about?" Richard pulls his coat tighter around himself.

"Daniel was ill."

"What?" Richard leans closer, not sure he has heard properly. He isn't sure why they are discussing Daniel now. Surely, everything is about Thom.

"Daniel had leukaemia," she says, turning to face him.

"You're joking..." Richard shrugs, giving a twisted smile. His mum doesn't flinch, however.

"It wouldn't be a very funny joke would it?"

"No, not really," Richard admits. "I'm not sure what to say, then..."

Richard does what he usually does in these situations and lights a cigarette. Mum hates him smoking, but he guesses this is one of the times she won't say anything. He sucks on the cigarette as if it is giving him oxygen.

"Are you mad at me?" Mum asks, pressing her fingers against his arm. She seems afraid to fully touch him.

"Why would I be mad at you? Daniel didn't tell me either."

"*I should've told you. I told Thom a few days ago and he got really angry.*" *Ah, there's the connection,* Richard finally understands.

"Well, I'm not Thom," Richard exhales with a puff of smoke. The cigarette is burning his lungs. The usual comfort it provides isn't working. Maybe he'll never enjoy one again until he finds Thom.

"Mum, do you think that's why Daniel killed himself?" he asks, stubbing the cigarette out after only about a minute.

"I really don't know, Richard," she mumbles, not looking at him.

He guesses asking her that is a little unfair. How should she know what really makes a man, *her son*, jump in front of a train? But, Richard doesn't know that she is still holding back. And he won't know for a few weeks still.

"Well, that makes things a bit different."

"For us?" Mum asks shakily.

"Of course not, silly," Richard insists, pulling her to him again. She is limp in his arms, a heavy weight. "We're fine, Mum. It's just strange finding out your brother killed himself, *for sure*, I mean."

She starts crying quietly into his shoulder. Richard only wonders how long it will be before she will accept Daniel's death and Thom's disappearance. At the same time he wonders if he will ever accept those facts and how long it will take him.

"Let's tell the doctors and the police we're going home now," he says gently.

It's long overdue.

kristina england

There's no winning (losing) here

You (I) are so black and white
or maybe it is me (you) drawing
these red scream splatters.

No, we painted this scene.
Restate it.
We painted this scene.
Take it back.

Mouths (words), arms (blows).
There's nothing left to hide (seek).
Even our guardians duck (uncurl).

Beware the voices, the silence
Ricocheting off our expressions –

I (you) am right. You (I) are wrong.

Broken

& life's many caveats ...a thought of you, our mapping incomplete every time we come close cells still recycle dermis to dermis deep-gened to epi- pigment to pigment air-skimming butterfly of muscles swimming give shape to a mouth soothe creases from letters across a face trace [of] faults shush... fingers to lips whisper shush! Every touch is	Every touch is... shush! fingers to lips whisper shush... trace [of] thoughts across a face soothe creases from letters give shape to a mouth swimming butterfly of muscles air-skimming pigment to pigment deep-gened to epi- dermis to dermis cells still recycle every time we come close our mapping incomplete ...a thou ought of you, & life's many caveats
---	--

w. m. lewis

An odd pair

I found the 3 of Clubs
and 3 of Diamonds
by the roadside They
were lost or discarded
or both Who cares
really? But an odd pair
they were The diamond all
worn and tacky and the club
fresh as if it had never heard
the word 'poker' from a
potty mouth When the dog
picked up the 3 of Clubs
I said "Good boy" and we
walked on in the morning air
like two blokes who'd won
and drunk big but weren't
quite ready to go home

Defusal

I get to the scene and already it's chaos:

~~crossed~~

~~wires,~~*

and barely connected everywhere
 bits.

As I reach out to cut

you stride in and cry: ***Wait!***

That might be important!

Before opening
and closing
your mouth.

By this point other beaks are being stuck in:

- *Have you tried approaching it this way?*
 - *Just attach that bit to that.*
 - *Fuck's sake - get rid of it somebody!*
 - *I don't think that that goes with that.*

Outside the window my high school teacher
gives me a **double thumbs up**,
while my supervisor picks fluff from her jumper
and says I'm probably

getting
in
the
way
of
things.

I notice my parents' concerned smiles
have arrived at the doorway
but they don't come in.

*Isn't this a dangerous
use of time?
they say.*

*superfluous parts

mark young

A line from Albert Einstein

A garden hose
is most often
more effective
& always cheaper

than myocardial
perfusion scans
in reading subtle
body energies

once we know
what it is we
are doing &
the visual short-

hand necessary
to interpret the
vagaries of water
becomes intuitive.