

Daddy's Coming Home

I knew you wouldn't be coming back, that day you walked out of the door into the spring sunshine. 'Why's Daddy going away?' the children asked. And I told them there were some things that were more important than us; but I never was a good liar. There'd always been that dark beast sitting there in the space between the two of us, never acknowledged, always hedged around. This was something you had to do, you'd muttered. You had no choice; it was just the way you were. You said you'd miss the children.

But you still went, as if all the years meant nothing. We'd worked at our relationship, hadn't we? Remember when we used to argue like spoilt teenagers, trading insults till we ran out, and how we'd cry afterwards, clinging to each other's warm bodies as if we'd never let go? And over the years, we each learnt what annoyed the other: anticipating, avoiding. Even when the children came, and the tired nights grew long, still we made it work.

But all you said that day, was that you'd miss the children. Is that all, I thought. Is that all I get? And then I noticed your daffodils, all nodding in the icy wind, agreeing. I told you they'd been trampled down, didn't I? But I never told you it was I who did it, sneaking out in your after-dark and stamping them into the mud while I cried.

You left when our children were – in your own words – “just getting interesting”. You wouldn't see them growing, turning into little people. You wouldn't hear Emily read from her first school book, you'd never pick up little Sam from playgroup. Like everything else, I have to do it all. I go and collect him, and he hurtles out, Mummy! Mummy! and hugs me, waving a crayon drawing; but it's your eyes that look out at me, and I turn away.

At Christmas, Emily asked straight out: 'is Daddy coming back?' Sam put down his Buzz Lightyear and looked at me, silent. And I tried, God knows I tried; but I couldn't tell them. I just said, 'I don't know, dear.' I'm a coward, too; but then, you've always known that. Just as I've always known you wouldn't be coming back.

This morning we get up early and put on our best clothes. I'm wearing that lovely black wool coat you bought me from Debenhams, with buttons up to the throat. I take time over my make-up, too. Plenty of blusher, lipstick dark cherry: I don't want anyone saying how pale I look. The children are shiny-faced and neat. Emily's hair looks so lovely today I want to cry, but I don't, as I help her into her coat and her shiny black shoes. Sam has his quilted anorak that will keep out the cold. You see? I'm still looking after them. I get them all ready then dash back into the kitchen, for a moment with the cooking brandy.

And here we shiver, in the cold lightless November drizzle. It's our turn, as we stand amongst the people who line the High Street, amongst the shops that have seen it all: the butcher with his slabbed meat, the travel agent promising escape, the post office where I send your letters. The children are shivering but the cold has reached my core and I'm numb. I squeeze their hands as the wind flutters our coats and the drizzle falls harder. I nod to a woman, a vulture I know who's here every time, waiting for carrion. I hear her confide: '*She's taking it well, I must say*'. And she doesn't say, but I hear her think: *she can't have loved him much*. So I swallow, and huddle the children close to me. I'm telling myself that I always knew it, always knew that you wouldn't be coming back, so I

shouldn't be surprised. But down by the town hall, the first of the hearses appears out of the grey, slower than I thought a car could go. Somewhere a parson's saying a prayer, and somewhere cold trumpets play, but mostly it's silent. I'm being strong.

The second one passes; then the third. I can see the coffins, burnished wood behind graven glass, stately and dark. The fourth approaches, and I know it's you. I'm squeezing the children's hands so tightly that Emily cries out, but I stand strong and collected because I always knew you wouldn't be coming back. But, oh! Then I see through the coffin walls and I see you, lying asleep there, lying like you used to do beside me; and I realise that, after all, I was wrong. You've come back to me.

Someone's screaming, and as I run after the hearse I realise that it's me. I don't care. I catch up with it and throw myself against the door, trying to open it because I want to be with you, to lie with you, by your side. I can't let you go again . . .

Now I'm sitting by the roadside, with my back against a bollard and someone saying I need air, but I'm sobbing and I say, where are the children? I kneel and the cold road soaks the knees of my stockings, and they let the children come to me and I'm hugging them both. We're all crying, and somehow I say, it's all right now. It's all right. Daddy's come home.