

The Noises Inside of Us

On the McSawyer's front lawn, an infant is dangling upside down from within the branches of a tree. I watch as the child's chosen branch begins first bowing, and then, slowly, slowly, snap. The boy's expression is blank, his eyes are rolled backwards. There's no kicking or struggling, no moment of opposition; to be rendered unconscious is welcomed, like the possibility of sleep after a long day.

His curls blow in the air's resistance, defying the motion of body and branch. The mop of hair provides the only noticeable discrepancy in the otherwise straightforward choreography of the body's acceleration towards the earth. When there's no distance left to travel, the descent ends with a thud, crack, crumple.

For a second, I wonder if the child has broken his neck. There's no movement or screaming, and then it comes, the almighty hollering.

Avril opens the kitchen window to let out a breeze of profanities. There's a dumbstruck pause; a moment of incredulity that hangs in the air; a transmission of pure thought; a pondering gaze. This is unnatural to the boy's mind, the opposite of his familial experience – where female is kind, male unkind. It creates a blockage in his chain of response. He needs to make sense from apparent *no* sense.

The boy starts bawling again. Avril lifts a frying pan from the kitchen hooks, and walks outside, flinging open an imaginary flyscreen in the dramatic style of an Aussie soap actor. The flyscreen might not be real but the frying pan sure as hell is, and it's a weighty cast-iron thing that could cave a man's skull in.

'You dipshit,' she says, pan held high, striding out onto the lawn, half tripping over her strappy shoes.

'Be careful,' I call from the window.

'Funny,' Mr McSawyer replies, raising his middle finger at me.

'Stick it up your arse and wiggle it—' says Avril.

I make a silent 'Shhh!' with my finger against my lips.

In the street, a young teenager is sat on his bike, chewing gum, taking an interest in what's going on. He's shouting at Avril: whitetrash, whitetrash, whitetrash. He sounds like a

record with a jumping needle. She rotates on her heels one way and then the other, swinging the pan with the skill of a tennis player returning fast-paced balls. Boing! Boing! Boing!

Mr McSawyer is calling to his wife, and I beckon Avril back into the house.

‘Quickly,’ I say, ‘before there’s trouble.’

She hangs on her toes for a moment.

I’ve known Avril since I was a child; she used to perch herself at the end of our driveway playfully pulling apart insects. Beetles were her favourite, she opened their carapaces and dismantled them, setting them out in their individual parts.

When she grew bored of insects, she moved onto birds, unfurling their wings, and applying pressure with her thumbs, snapping their metacarpi, and listening to their melodies of pain. Rodents were next, she watched their eyes bulge with fear as she broke their little legs, rendering them immobile.

She invited me to join her. Our worlds became one, and the entirety of that world was dedicated to the exploration of pain inflicted on others. The building of traps, the flinging of missiles, the beautiful mechanics leading back from tripped wires. They all had one purpose: to demonstrate that humans and animals alike, moving about their lazy, overfed lives, are easily lulled into a false sense of security by their undemanding existences, a simple prey to snare.

‘Pain wakes them up,’ says Avril, raising her right hand as she walks through the door.

‘And fear stops them sleeping,’ I say, completing our motto, and slamming my hand into hers.

She places her hands on my shoulders and walks me in front of the hallway mirror. I’m dressed in flipflops, with long flowing hair reaching down the length of my sleeveless chiffon dress.

‘If the wind were to blow under you,’ she says, ‘you’d take off.’

I pretend to float into the air, fluffing my dress so it billows.

She laughs.

‘Remind me why we’re doing this,’ I say.

‘They’ve left a stain,’ she says, ‘and it needs removing.’

In the evening, Eugen comes around to listen to music in my bedroom. I answer the door, happy to escape my father and grandfather's after-dinner conversation.

'No,' my father says, 'no one has done that to tyres since the seventies.'

'Hoccum,' my grandfather replies, 'everyone at my club still shaves them.'

Eugen asks with a shrug what they're becoming so heated about. I shake my head and half roll my eyes, guiding him upstairs, eager to share everything about the McSawyer kid and the whitetrash boy.

He asks where Avril is now.

'I told her to wait outside,' I say.

'You need to be careful,' he says, 'you could be in real trouble if someone finds out.'

'There's no proof we cut into the tree branch with the old bow saw in the shed,' I say, laughing. 'It could've been anyone.'

'You have motive,' says Eugen, taking my hand.

'What motive?'

'You hate them.'

'I hate everyone, except you.'

Reading this as a softening, Eugen takes the opportunity to reach his hand underneath my summer dress and onto my knee. He casually rests it there, pretending he's forgotten it's attached to him, not daring to move it any higher.

'What about Avril?' he asks.

'Yeah,' I smile, 'she hates everyone too.'

Eugen is my summer boyfriend, eighteen years old, a beach accessory and carrier of bags. Yesterday, we bumped into some girls from college on Margate's sandy promenade, opposite the arcades, near the bungee trampoline.

'Hi Jen,' says Liz, with a tilt of her head and a tone implying the need for me to justify being in the same place at the same time as her.

I stand in my sarong, touching the corner of my sunglasses, casually timing my words so that she needs to wait for me to speak.

'This is Eugen,' I say.

It's something she already knows; they were an item, not so long ago. She begins curling her lip.

'He's my boyfriend,' I add slowly, enjoying the exaggerated elongation of my words, and its effect on her.

I've never used the b-word in front of Eugen before. The word boyfriend means to him a condition of continuous physical connection. His semi-bearded face looks expectant, his hands run higher between my thighs, his caresses last longer and settle more lingeringly on my back.

Eugen doesn't understand. There'll be moments of embrace later in our relationship but not yesterday at the beach and not now in my bedroom. They'll be when the bright blues and crisp whites of summer turn to the muddied hues of autumn.

I despise mooning couples, who fall inescapably into one another. Intimacy must be a route to the end, not an endless beginning, otherwise it becomes a black hole, sucking you in.

In the night, when Eugen takes his uneased frustration home with him, Avril tells me her plan. She's been searching YouTube to find out more about tyre shaving, after overhearing the earlier conversation between my father and grandfather, convinced it will provide the perfect recipe of pain and fear for Mr McSawyer.

'Believe in chaos,' she says, looking at my puzzled face.

'I do.'

She asks me to find a rechargeable rotary cutter.

I search the garage to find one, while Avril opens the boot of Dad's car, pulls up the false base, unclips the scissor jack. She takes it over to the McSawyer's driveway, walking past the rusting Corsa owned by Mrs McSawyer, and starts jacking up the Audi in the dark of night to shave the tread from the tyres.

'You're crazy,' I say, bringing her the rotary cutter, 'it'll be a miracle if McSawyer doesn't notice.'

'I don't care,' says Avril, 'he deserves it.'

I watch from the window the next morning. It isn't until I see Mr McSawyer walk out onto his lawn that the mistake becomes apparent. Not our mistake, but theirs. The car is missing already. Mrs McSawyer must've used it for the school run, leaving her aged car on the drive.

This is an unexpected turn; she's never allowed to drive the Audi. How could we foresee this happening? There was no beef between Mrs McSawyer and us, the opposite: I felt sorry for her having to live with that lolloping fool.

The only way to fix this is to tell McSawyer, so he can telephone his wife and have her pull over.

'I'm not going to waltz over there and confess my sins,' says Avril, 'not to that bastard.'

An anonymous letter is settled on, and we begin work with a Pritt stick and a few supermarket magazines that are lying around unopened, cutting out the necessary words. There's no time to think of anything more imaginative. I wear latex gloves from a box my parents keep for messy tasks and select a sheet from the middle of a pack of printer paper. I lay it out on a piece of cling film on the table. It's important to work fast, while taking as many precautions as possible not to leave a trace of evidence. I've seen enough daytime police shows to know that a single hair or some other trace can give the game away.

When it's done, I look out my window to the far end of the road, where I see the familiar sight of the morning postman bumbling along, his earphones shutting out the aural world. This is my opportunity, I can time this so that we meet at the bottom of the drive before the McSawyer house. It's obscured from sight by a leylandii hedge, and I'll ask him to take the letter with the rest of the post he's about to push through the McSawyer letterbox.

'Wait!' says Avril, stopping me from stepping out the door.

She identifies the obvious flaw: my interaction with the postman.

Thinking for a moment, I revise the plan, dropping the letter with the McSawyer address in the middle of the pavement instead, to be discovered by the postman, in the hope he'll follow a predictable pattern of behaviour and deliver it.

The plan works. There's still time to save Mrs McSawyer from harm. Mr McSawyer won't be able to resist opening the strange looking envelope; unless he fears something sinister is in there (?). *This is silly*, he'll open it. He'll phone her, she'll pull over to answer her phone, or have one of the children answer it. The day will be saved.

I keep looking out for Mrs McSawyer, like she's a loved one returning from a sea voyage. But it's the sense of being on the right side of wrong that I'm waiting to return. How long does a recovery lorry take to arrive? How long for a ride home? Why doesn't Mr McSawyer use the Corsa to collect her?

There are so many variables to explain this timeline. She might've absent-mindedly taken both sets of keys for the Corsa with her, or lost one set many years ago, never replacing them. Perhaps the Corsa is broken down and that's why she took the Audi.

I turn on the television and watch the local news, then start drilling down to twitter, looking for any mention of anything on the roads. All this time, Avril is as cool as ice, none of my hot panic melts her.

Mrs McSawyer's social media accounts are easy to find, she looks younger and happier than in real life. She's tried to make the most of the pandemic, not grumble about being stuck at home. There are pictures of her on wet welly walks with the children and of the dens they've made in the woods.

'Mrs McSawyer makes the best of bad situations,' I tell Avril, turning my phone to show her a selfie of Mrs M. and her son at the hospital, from when the kid fell out the tree. Both have their facemasks on. Mrs M. calls the boy Master Bump.

'Cute,' says Avril, not meaning it.

There's a comment from one of Mrs M.'s friends suggesting he wear a helmet next time he climbs a tree, and some off-kilter response by someone about it being a helmet that got her into the mess of having a kid. The joke hasn't gained any traction, the comments simply shrink away from it.

Written several times is 'Awww! Poor dear, heart, heart, kiss'. The commenters failing to notice the carbon copies they are making of earlier comments. Or perhaps they're purposeful. These people simply don't care. Online friends only want the impression of giving a damn. They let predictive text do it for them.

I'm becoming lost in Mrs M.'s virtual life and forgetting that I'm trying to find out if the danger to her has been averted.

Mr McSawyer finally appears from his house. He's dressed casually and walking down his drive, out onto the road. Why would he be on foot? Surely, they wouldn't still be in walking distance? This is confusing, I'm trying to piece together the logic. If the Corsa isn't working, he would've called a friend to pick him up or else an Uber.

Dad appears yawning and stretching. He's been on furlough from work for six months and has just woken. I'd forgotten he was in the house. He's complaining about the mess on the kitchen table. He doesn't see Avril and tells me to clear it up.

'Mum'll have a fit,' he says.

'It sounds like he's having a fit,' says Avril.

'What?' he asks, looking at me.

'Nothing,' I say.

He takes himself off to the lounge with an overflowing bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee.

'We should've stuck with insects,' I say. 'People are too complicated; their lives look predictable but they're not.'

'You worry too much,' says Avril.

'They contain too many variables. From an aeroplane, people might look like ants. As you zoom in and land back on the ground, they grow into messy organisms with complicated thought processes, while all the time pretending to be something simpler.'

'Deep,' says Avril, unwilling to take any of the burden of worry for herself.

The weight on my chest is lifted when the Audi turns into the cul-de-sac and Mrs McSawyer steps out. The weight reapplies when she returns from the house carrying her yoga mat and kit bag.

'Wait,' I shout, running out of the house without any shoes on my feet.

She doesn't see me, or else ignores me, and drives off. McSawyer is walking towards me, briefly waving at the departing car.

'You should put some shoes on,' he says.

I decide this isn't the time for cowardice and ask him if he read the letter.

'It wasn't necessary,' he says.

'What do you mean?'

'I saw you in the night.'

'You're risking her life,' I say.

'I've not committed any crime,' he replies.

He has me cornered.

'Fuck you,' I say, turning away.

'And a good day to you too,' says McSawyer, waving a caricatured farewell.

'There's only one gym in town where Mrs S. will be heading,' Avril says.

I look at her with a dull expression.

'You can drive there,' she says.

Avril is right, her words bring me to attention. I don't bother to find shoes. The car key is in my pocket. I drive my father's car barefoot, my feet slipping from the pedals and the rain hitting hard, drumming on the roof, and pelting the windscreen.

I see the Audi turning into the car park. Mrs M. slows and turns into a parking space.

'Please wait,' I call to her.

She points at herself and looks around, in a gesture of asking if it is her who I wish to speak to. It feels like I'm on one side of a door, but not a simple door, a portal door, where I'm currently safe and anonymous, and that walking through the door will throw me into an unknown place where everything is at risk.

'Yes,' I say.

'What is it?'

'There's something I need to show you,' I say, pointing at her tyres.

'Why do they look like that?' she asks.

This is the bit where I need to decide on how much of the story she needs to hear. Do I valiantly protect Avril? What does Mr McSawyer deserve? How do I protect my own interests?

Version 1: I tell her everything, placing particular emphasis on the danger Mr M. put her in by letting her drive his car.

Version 2: I tell her simply that it was me and brace myself for the consequences.

'It was me,' I say, turning to leave before she can strike me.

'But why? Wait.'

'I hate listening to your husband shouting at you through the thin wall that divides our houses.'

I brace myself.

'And that's a reason to harm him?'

'Yes.'

'And it was last night when you vandalised the tyres? He was looking out the window at something, I remember.'

Her lungs begin to burn in her chest.

'I'm going to phone a friend,' she says.

'Would you like a lift?' I ask.

She looks at my feet and refuses.

I drive into the distance, disappearing from her. There is no return to our street for Mrs M. or her children. She moves to a place beyond the horizon, a tiny ant person, no longer relevant to us. But for that one zoomed-in moment, saving her tiny ant life was all-important to me, so important that I risked my anonymity, and now she's gone, as dead to me as if she were never alive.

From that day forward, Mr McSaywer has something over me, and I have something over him. And his far-off ex-wife has something over both of us. This triangle of knowing keeps the noises inside of us suppressed and I stop finding purpose in the distress of other living things. This is when Avril becomes bored and leaves me to my life. It's on the same day that I celebrate turning eighteen. It makes me sad that she's not there.

Mr McSawyer never comes over to complain. He's working harder than ever to support his divided household. It's his penance for wishing his wife dead. Or had he imagined her disabled from the hoped-for accident? Perhaps his mind's eye had seen her vegetating in a hospital bed; a place in which she was diminished.

I've no doubt, if there had been an accident, she would've triumphed still. All she was waiting for was a trigger for change. Avril's actions taken together with Mr McSawyer's were the catalyst she needed, while I was the messenger disguised as a villain.

With my role fulfilled and the summer ended, there remains only one thing to do, and so I climb the stairs to my bedroom with Eugen and put some music on, louder this time than before.