

Plastic People

The sky was the texture and colour of fractured bone on the way to *Hell and Back*. It wasn't going to be warm. She was wrapped up, apart from forgetting her hat - she'd given out yards about that on the trip down - she knew she'd be cold without it. She hated how they stayed so quiet when she gave out. Her husband seemed content to contain her in the neat brackets of her own rants. "I was so busy getting you ready I forgot about myself!" Her son, flanked by two empty seats behind, piped up from the middle - "you can borrow mine". And that just made her feel worse, for her anger to bring out her child's kindness. She looked in the rear view and thought well, at least there's that. Here in the front seats - it is what it is.

But in the ninety seconds since they'd locked the car assumptions were already shifting. Her own husband had drifted ahead towards the entrance with Gav's wife and beyond each of their two kids. They had been on about the hurricane in full swing across the US, that got her onto climate change and wrecking the planet and so she was telling Gav about this article she was writing for work.

"We've come from the Holocene - that was the last age - and now the new geological time unit is the Anthropocene. Mankind's signature on the earth."

"Wow, that's mad but makes sense I guess," said Gav, enthusiastically but she could tell he didn't really fully register what she was saying.

She found herself nervously talking about her work amongst the other school parents, if only to find some sort of common ground between them. She thought the planet pretty mutual as shared territory for conversation.

“It hasn’t been declared yet, you know, rubber stamped, but there’s an international working group to decide if it’s really a thing. But it really is a thing. I mean you just have to add it all up.”

Her lot had been up since early, on this, the last weekend of the school holidays. She had more or less refused to go out all summer and stayed in playing board games all day and researching her article at night. Sticking to a simple routine helped to keep her on track. Brush teeth. Dress.

Breakfast. Shout and call. Shout and rage. Rage and blame. The shoes, the lunches, the shoes, the socks, the shoe, the sock. Games for hours. Dinner. Work. Her son had been playing *Minecraft* and *Risk* and *Settlers of Catan* non-stop for weeks. All about building things within every game they’ve got. Cities. Castles. Civilisations. Real and digital. World Domination. Prospecting. Was it too heavy handed to say A Future? Oh the optimism. When she played it years ago, *Catan* was just called *Settlers*. The aim is to build and develop holdings while trading and gaining resources - you exchange sheep for wheat or ore for lumber or bricks. Acquistors all. And it had wooden pieces which she loved as they felt sort of old-fashioned; settlements, roads, cities, all on hexagonal shaped board segments. She put her hand in the pocket of her fleece now and felt a piece from the game. A thin white wooden matchstick of a road. She’d picked it up off the kitchen floor on the way out the door that morning not wanting it to get lost. She fiddled with it now in her pocket turning it over and over.

The car park, a field really, was jammed with families funnelling into *Hell and Back*. When her husband first described it to her it sounded like Helen Bach or Helenbach. Another woman or a currency. Or maybe one big clunky metaphor for the shit heap their marriage was in. She reckoned as many couples as not had had that thought driving here today. It, *Hell and Back*, was in fact a 2.5km long obstacle course. Like those TV programmes where families were pitted in adventure races to see who is the fittest. Thumbs up for the modern gladiators. Don’t be cynical

she told herself. In a way that was her job though, as a journalist. She was permanently questioning, playing with the sound of words in her head. Her husband had suggested today as a way to get all of them out, so they didn't tag team on the parenting again; to do something together. She made him say sorry in so many different ways.

The soft accented voice from the tannoy triggered static sensations down her scalp, commanding them to queue up between the barriers for entry. She looked directly into the speaker above as if it would reveal who owned that tingling voice. Helen Bach herself? Energetic entertainers kept the kids amused in the queue in that patronising rainbow-tinted clownish way until they moved on through to the withered grass inside the enclosure.

"There's this photographer," she continued to Gav, "who takes all these photos from way up in a plane. Spent mines, salt flats, flame-raised forests. Destroyed landscapes, basically. And they're all so – beautiful."

"He takes them from an aeroplane?" Gavin says.

"Well, maybe from a satellite." She stops. "It's all meant to make you – think," she trails off.

"I know" he says. "Climate change is pretty bad alright."

"It sure is."

They were past registration and Gav piped up, "we did this experiment at work where we were all to put our plastic water bottles in recycling and then after a week there were eleven bin bags full of them, from only the one office. So that's like about three bottles per employee. It's really

made us think about nature and all, and what if, you know, we just kept going and everyone else did too, it'd be too much".

"Corporate Social Responsibility. Nice to see it. What do you do now, instead of all the bottles?"

"We have this tap in the kitchen and they gave us all reusable bottles."

And a consultant got paid for that! Instead of blurting she churned over ways to startle him and spoil the conversation: she could alert him to the cultural interpretations of his office act, artists who were ripping the art scene a new one with their responses to their small gestures. Finucci's HELP spelled out in a million plastic bottle tops, just think of that? Or Mattison's ceramics mimicking the bleaching of the coral reefs. Or about the fibres of plastic everywhere, the million Lego pieces washed up on Aberystwyth beach, in the bellies of birds, in the flesh of fish, lining our innards - not just polluting nature, now the fabric of it. A plastic soup stirred through the bloodstream. But what good would that do, she'd be telling him too much, sound too despairing. It would only alienate her further.

After they'd checked the screens for starting times Gav went off to get some food. The other two had brought the kids to get their faces painted and she was queueing up for coffee. The roving crowd were plenty, grey and amorphous to her now, jostling and making her anxious, and there were wasps everywhere she looked. Wasn't it late in the summer for them? Beside the coffee van was a 1950s cupcake stand. The seller dressed in a tacky vintage outfit - how faddish. Had she always been so critical? The cakes were swarmed. The smell of sugar must have attracted them, if wasps can smell? She would find that out by the end of the day if only to satisfy her own curiosity.

The icing so enticing for the wasps but not a single person in the queue. Proboscis. Suckers. Tubular and flexible. The woman behind the counter picked up an entire tray of buns covered in wasps and just slid them into the bin. Dirty, dirty creatures the burlesque baker said spanking the air. What a waste, she thought. The rubbish bins already full to overflowing with paper cups and packets and discarded food. Collecting her coffee she considered how you dispose of the things you despise in yourself or what is to be kept. The corseted cook folded herself over to pick up another tray and Helen Bach's saucy voice asked 'Everyone Ready.....'

She stood a bit back from the crowd under a yellowing sycamore tree, between the starting pen and finishing enclosure where suspended banners commanded runners to 'Go!' and 'Win!' respectively. Peering through the wire of the starting pen the parents watched their kids heading off in waves. She plonked all the coats and bags at her feet. She was very near to the klaxon that sounded as each wave of competitors started, so every few minutes it belted out at her. The first obstacle a ten-foot-high wall over which groups of kids scrambled up and whoosh, down the gullet they went. First course.

Her husband came back with her son's face left unpainted, *she knew he was too old for it*, and then he brought him off again to start his race with the others. She was better off letting them to it. As long as they had fun. She was here anyway. Now, she keeps seeing familiar faces of people from her area in Dublin and that served to let her know how humdrum she had become. This wasn't adventure, this was social control. Ticketed jeopardy with appropriate levels of public liability and several ambulance cadets on standby.

People milled around her and for some time she didn't move. The grass of the meadows beyond were in tatters from the thundering feet renting lines across it. The contours of activity seen from

space, like some child's frantic scribble on a scrap of paper writ large on the landscape. The criss-crossed sludge of humanity. Who was to blame? The government, business, all of us. Was she also more political now? It was all so artificial, she thought, all *this*. Overwhelmed by the labyrinth of lines made she tried to draw herself back to the day she was in. She looked out over the fields of mud and rungs and obstacles and thought maybe it would have actually been fun to enter the race. It aroused memories in her of freedom and childhood and not knowing or caring about one's fate.

She wondered where they were at on the course. Perhaps half-way round. She imagined her husband having all the fun. She fidgeted again with rising anxiety then slumped down under the tree. A sort of resignation or avoidance of conflict, however slight.

Like this morning when playing *Settlers*, her husband had wanted to build a settlement but couldn't as she was blocking him on the board.

"You're an impenetrable citadel," he said in a put-on voice, though not unlike his own cadence, and raising one eyebrow. It was one of those two-tier conversations that the kid would never get but she knew what he might mean alright.

"That's a pretty cold way to describe your wife," she'd said back smiling all the while. "Maybe you just need a longer road."

She'd raised his one eyebrow with two of her own and a challenging tilt of the head. Kids do get it though, don't they? The tone. They must do - because everyone can understand, even subconsciously, what their own parents are like and later in life can even sum it up. Her husband flicked the wooden piece of road off the table. Her son found this hilarious.

But now, under the tree, some form of existential crisis loomed. Surrounded by tupperware – full of bruised grapes that tumbled over strawberries bleeding from their cut tops. She knew half of it probably wouldn't get eaten. But it wasn't worth the row to make them. She prepared herself to cry. It was as though it had all been laid bare before her. The course already run, the template marked, the view from above is of that pocked landscape, but up close you're in the rut, scrabbling and the banks are steep. She was entombed under the pile of coats and spare clothes, bags and lunches. Beset by the paralysis of a life unlived. Stuffocating.

The activity swarmed around her and she fell again into thoughts of her husband running. She imagined his frame of muscles and sinew hauling her son over difficult obstacles. Raw and guttural sounds coming from him. His show of strength. Sweating. Exerting. The crowd spun further away. Against the warm palette of her eyelids she conjured up an image of Helen Bach – a wasp-waisted Barbie model, hair so golden, forever young, dipped in a honeyed tan - her bendable body folding and folding again. Her lips botoxed and shaped by design to curve around a dick. But weren't we all supposed to adapt ourselves to changing conditions. Yes? She too could replace her water and fat with leaner plastics. Halting decay. Yet, given the right conditions of burial she might revert to oil. No. No. She existed in her prosaic form.

The klaxon rang again for another wave and triggered a hum in her head - a tightening. In an instant she opened her eyes to see a silhouette of a man above her. 'Stop' - at least she thought that was what he said. She was lost in her reckoning, this shadowed figure above her, a voice; vague and mumbled - towering over her in a woolly cap, very hipster, handsome. He bent down and said very quietly as if in a whisper; "there's a very large wasp cluster behind you," pointing at the tree, "watch out, in case you get stung".

She glanced behind then back towards him. She was close enough to smell him. Waxy. Manly. Could this be a big moment? She was close enough for several fantastical outcomes. But she said nothing and just stared up at him. Yet was there something unnatural or wrong-faced about him? Still, she valued that face or allowed the overly familiar exchange. She figured that he saw in her a mystery. What was it that didn't fit? There was a blatant tenderness. Not his eyes, no, she looked....nor his nose. His lips then... yes, that was it. Rearranged...half melted away. Really. And flashing back to his eyes with this knowledge and now in them she believed she could see the wreckage of a plane crash or family in flames or a car flipping, a boiling kettle overturned, a future as kindling, a grotesque and violent deliquescence. He looked at her showing no current pain, perhaps even a contentment. For a vacant moment she was gratified or indulged but was the first to look away.

“They're later this year due to the delayed winter. Are you ok here - under the tree? Someone in the race?”

“Yes. They're racing.’ She scanned the crowd. ‘Just waiting for them to come back.’ “Should be done soon.”

She looked towards the finish line but immediately she wanted to look back again at him. There was within her a yearning. A deep and catastrophic yearning to look back again.

“Yellow Jackets. They have an excellent sense of smell.”

Her eyes whipped back to him, to his lips - “Eh, I'm sorry. What?”

“Invasive species. Pushing out our own to face extinction as usual. I hope you don't get stung. Maybe it's the lunch boxes. They like the sweetness.”

She snapped the lunch box closed and looked up to thank him but like that he was gone - he and his lips had melted into the crowd - where? Even the wasps had moved off. Leaving her here - indiscernible, small. Alone.

She packed up their belongings and turned to mulling over the title for her article - turning words over in her mouth. Plastic. Clasp it. Silt cap. Cast Lip. *What did he say was usual?* She considered the futile hope of stemming a polymer tide by planting trees or having no car or even drinking water from reusable bottles. That was a worry. So no route at this stage that would reverse the damage? She wondered why all her decisions seemed to be ethical ones. In the scale of things she was infinitesimally tiny so why should she have all these dilemmas mounting up. Incanting against her anxieties she recast the man's face and their conversation. Chilled, she put her hands in her pockets to warm them and felt the *Settlers* road between her fingers. She thought of playing the game that morning and the methods that could lead to victory - each player through luck and strategy amassing the infrastructure of an empire, gaining points along the way until one player wins enough victory points and it ends. Game over. A soft descent into a resource-hungry apocalyptic future for the other players - how apt a reminder of her appalling insignificance. Her son had explained the rules to her. She loved that moment when he was teaching her. She will tell him then when she sees him that there would always be resources. If there weren't any she would seek out a volcano and bellow for the lava to flow and create new sources of unconnected land. She would send wild prayers and through dimming light she would funnel new surfaces on which to stand. *She would do that.*

Her eyes returned to the 'Win!' sign and below it she spotted her son just cresting the hill of the final tongue-like victory slide to be regurgitated by the race. *Schlump*, and down. She had missed

photographing him at the finish line. That was why she'd been waiting there. She jumped up and snapped a picture of him on her phone. He was ambling towards her, covered head to toe in mud.

"Now that's the sign of a great time," she said to her son, rubbing his head. He lunged at her threatening a mucky hug.

"No, don't you come near me!", backing away from him with good humour.

Gav and his son also emerged from the course primordially muddy to join them.

"Did you just wait here all this time on your own?" Gav asked.

She shrugged and scanned the crowd to see if she could spot her molten man amid the specks of people. The whole flimsy film of humanity would one day buckle into a tissue-thin sediment. All roads, works of art, all actions both good and bad, the factories, the farms, the spaces, pasts, let's hope the pasts. *So it could only be about more.* She had this sense of creation or future - in that place that was at once barren and futuristic but rolling through it the sonic memories of the current time, the klaxon sounding, the buzzing insect-ridden purgatory under that tree, that day, in the future telling - that clear day. To always be what you are but to mould and melt and re-mould into anything. For now: *Settle.* Build. Expand. New roads. Develop. *Re-settle.* Adapt. Go with it. Forget the mechanics. People, in every epoch, all the same - all nomads in imperfect and ruined territory drawing lines between each other, erasing others, broken, re-joined, lines like ribbons or strings, bending elastic or faint traces, connections, disappearing, several and solid, like scars.

The sycamore leaves above her head persisted as palmate-veined umbrellas. They nodded in resolution and whispered round their rusting saw-toothed edges; samara shivered themselves free

in drones, whirligigs descending in a chorus for a possible spring. *And more is happening now.* Having faltered in her confidence, as wives do when humiliated, she reacted now when she could see her husband roaming back across the stubbled meadow with Gav's wife. She saw him clearer. He saw her. She saw her. She saw Plastic. Last pic. Slap tic. Lips act. Tips lac. Helen Bach. She opened her mouth as if to shout over to them. Instead she paused and nodded. *This could be easy.* With expectant eyes, the city kids racing back all stopped under the display to see where their teams had come in the race. Did they in fact *Win!?* And each turned away informed and programmed through the sensation and reward of the bright screens; revelling in the slew of information. The klaxon sounded again, a new wave embarked on the course, while lives about endured.