

Natural history

She'd had no wine the night before, nothing unusual to eat, yet there she was staring into the toilet bowl, making a mental note to buy more bleach even as her mouth filled with saliva.

It was no mystery. It had been eight years, give or take, but nothing else felt like this. She could conjure up every detail of the other times. The smell, the taste. The hope and the dread.

Waking up with it, staving it off with biscuits, sneaking away from her desk at work to vomit in the ladies. All to the same end: heartbreak and ruined knickers.

She spat into the toilet bowl.

'Fun times,' she said aloud. She stood up, gulped some air and opened the bathroom window. Rummaged in the cabinet for the anti-nausea tablets they kept in case they had to take the ferry in bad weather. There was one empty strip.

'Willpower, Joan,' she said to her reflection. She reached for her make-up bag.

Alec was at the kitchen table, lingering over his Saturday breakfast.

'I left you some eggs,' he said.

'Just a spoonful. I'm going for a run.'

'Twice in one week? You should buy your own sweatshirt.'

He went to brush his teeth. Joan checked whether there was tea left in the pot, poured, tasted and spat it out. Something sweet and milky would be better. Hot chocolate, if Sheena's kids hadn't finished it. She scraped the egg into the cat's bowl.

‘I’m away. Those peats won’t stack themselves,’ Alec said, pulling on an old denim jacket. ‘You’re pale. Feeling alright?’

‘Probably just the usual. I’ll run it off.’

Joan tidied the kitchen and got ready. She saw herself in the mirror by the door. Never mind the borrowed sweatshirt, the back seam of these old leggings was more of a worry. She grabbed the car keys from the hall table, deciding to drive the mile to Sheena’s. No point in arriving already exhausted.

The nausea returned as she navigated the bends and dips in the road. Pains in her eyeballs accompanied the car’s vibrations over the cattle grids – a new symptom, maybe a sign that something was different. What never changed was not knowing if things were better or worse. Whether feeling sicker meant a more secure pregnancy, or the opposite. She never knew, but couldn’t stop thinking, researching, asking Sheena.

A sheep that had been eyeing her car made a late decision to cross the road, and she braked sharply. She was driving badly, letting this take over her thoughts. She had to take more care. Maybe it wasn’t just herself she had to look after.

Sheena’s cheeks were still pink from the run. She put a mug of milky instant coffee on the table in front of Joan, always the same red and white striped mug, from a set Joan had given her.

‘The last one that isn’t chipped,’ Sheena said. ‘Things don’t stay nice for long in this house.’

She swept away some crumbs with her hand, bemoaning the fact she was the only person who ever tidied, and then as her dog sauntered in, the failure of her

family to keep the back door closed. She rarely spoke to Joan about the children. She was never boastful, even a little disparaging about them sometimes.

The dog greeted Joan with enthusiasm. Could it sense something? A crazy thought Joan dismissed. Then Sheena jumped up and raked through a cupboard, cursing at use-by dates, until she found what she was looking for.

‘Ginger biscuits.’ She sat down and ripped open the packet. ‘I recognise that look.’

‘It’ll be food poisoning,’ said Joan.

Sheena reached across to Joan’s hand.

‘Have you done a test? You can’t be out running if there’s any chance.’

‘Whatever the test says, there’s no chance.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘Thanks for not congratulating me.’

What it would do to her life. How her older self would cope with a teenager. She’d seen her sisters and Sheena struggle. It demanded a supply of energy that wasn’t always there now. Another morning, the same rotten feeling. The same thoughts.

It was just as well her pregnancies never took. But they took their time, clinging on pointlessly until the same end.

Different things tormented her at different times. For a while she tortured herself, thinking about how this childless state that people pretended didn’t matter would be one of the defining facts of her life. Part of her obituary. It was always the same stark sentence in the presbytery news: there were no children of the marriage. Little else seemed to count.

Joan delighted the cat with more uneaten eggs. ‘We mourn the passing of Joan Cameron, née Martin,’ she told it. ‘Somewhat ridiculous, but mostly well-meaning. A negative contribution to the island population crisis.’

But there was no funny side. She had to buy a test.

‘At least you know where you are now,’ Sheena said. She was standing at her kitchen table, her hands in a bowl as she rubbed butter and flour together for a crumble.

‘Not really,’ said Joan.

Screeching tyres and engines could be heard in the next room, where Sheena’s husband and son were watching a film. There was a shout from upstairs, her daughter panicking over a lost textbook.

‘Not even one sip of wine before she starts,’ Sheena said. She washed her hands and wiped them dry on her apron, and headed upstairs.

Sometimes Joan saw through Sheena’s forty year-old face to that of the girl she sat beside at school. Always in trouble for giggling, often at something Joan said. Now that side of her appeared rarely. There were still nights with a bottle of wine, and reminiscences, laughs about people they knew and things their husbands didn’t understand, but always Sheena was preoccupied in a small way, part of her mind was with Calum and Katie. Joan would have accepted this once, considered it no sacrifice. But now – there was less of her life left. A narrowing of possibilities was becoming clearer than the vision of the future she used to have: the sleeping infant, tiny clothes on the line, a mural on the nursery wall, a warm little body tucked against her while she read stories. All the delights. Even as she witnessed Sheena’s frustration, she used

to be convinced her own experience wouldn't be like that. And if it was, she would be grateful all the same.

But she knew how her body dealt with pregnancies. She could think as much as she liked, her mind would have no part in the matter.

'Emergency over. It was in her schoolbag,' Sheena said, resuming her work and adding sugar to the bowl. 'So – what's Alec saying?' She squeezed by to open the oven door, an uncomfortable heat sweeping over Joan, and put the crumble inside.

'I haven't told him,' Joan said. 'So when it's over there'll be less disappointment.'

'I'm sorry Joan.'

'I'm fine,' Joan said, worried that she looked more miserable than she felt.

'No point talking about it.'

Sheena scraped back her chair and stood up.

'I found something upstairs earlier,' she said. She turned on some music and passed Joan an empty cassette box. Sheena's teenage handwriting filled the card inside. 'You can't drink but you can listen.'

Joan looked down at the box. They had listened to those chiming eighties songs in their bedrooms when they were girls. Optimistic, naïve music, for the people they were then, girls who didn't know what they knew now. How were they even the same creatures?

Sheena switched off the music.

'I just want it over and done with,' Joan said.

She would have to tell him. There would be no talking about baby names this time. No consulting the pregnancy book they'd bought in Glasgow years before. How many times had she read that book? She'd memorised half of it. Studied the illustrations of what might be lurking in her pelvis, like a nutmeg still in the mace. The size at each week of pregnancy was compared to fruits and vegetables, as if adult women would be confused by millimetres and centimetres. Alec had asked if there was something more appropriate to his level of education.

It was a short train ride from the B&B into central Glasgow, and Joan had the day to herself while Alec met a university friend. The morning's nausea was subsiding and the sight of Frasers department store invigorated her. She'd promised herself something nice to wear, she'd put money aside, but as she browsed the rails she reconsidered. How sensible was it, really, to spend money on something that might not fit her in a few weeks' time – and afterwards might never fit her again, if Sheena's waistline was a reliable guide. There was a particular dress in an emerald green that she knew suited her. The last one in her size, the assistant said.

She held the dress against herself and looked in a mirror on the shop floor. She shouldn't take it into the fitting room, she would be sold on it. Then again, the odds must be in her favour now after all those disappointments, the law of averages would surely award her with one success. But – there was no escaping the thought – if it didn't, a dress would be no consolation. She put it back on the rail and walked to the escalator. The store was warm, too busy at the start of the sales and summer holidays.

She remembered Kelvingrove. She hadn't been there since she was a girl. Joan loved seeing the animal specimens close up, and the gift shop would have something she could buy for Sheena's children. She made her way to the underground.

It was bright and cool inside the red sandstone walls. Geology didn't interest her, but Joan looked at most of the samples anyway, reading every label that some learned person had taken the trouble to compose. It fascinated her, how everything had a name and was part of a family. Even certain stones had something in common with other stones. Basalt, granite, gneiss – *Lewisian gneiss*. There it was, important enough to be in a museum. One of the world's oldest rocks. She read the definition of metamorphic a few times, reciting the words in her head until she believed she understood what it meant and would be able to tell Alec later.

But natural history was what she'd come for. There were skeletons as well as taxidermy specimens on display. When she thought about it, each one was incomplete somehow. Only the innards or – if there was such a word – the stuffed outards on display. She played a game, guessing which animal a skeleton belonged to before reading the label, and was surprised to be more often wrong than right. A sheep without its wool looked sinister, carnivorous. The owl was thin and silly, its head too remote from its breast. It made her shudder.

Alec was impressed by her new geological knowledge. In the morning they ate their final breakfast at the B&B, and Joan felt the start of an ache, low in her belly. The bleeding didn't begin until they were almost home, and for that she was grateful.

It was one of those summer nights that made Joan want to emigrate. The hour before dawn in the middle of August, rain bouncing off the windows and the wind sending a moan down the chimney. They should go away somewhere, as soon as Alec could get time off. Joan turned to him, but he was asleep. She closed her eyes again, thinking of where they might go, whether it might be possible.

In a while there were dreams. Storms and airport queues, turbulence and lost luggage. Foreign hospitals. And then she's back in Glasgow, at a sale in Frasers where she buys a load of clothes. She hauls her bags through the turnstiles at the underground station, and heads to Kelvingrove. The Lewisian gneiss is still there, but it's bigger, almost her height, and shaped like an ancient fertility symbol. The Venus of Willendorf, she decides, the only one she's heard of. They have mis-labelled it, and she must tell someone. She follows a sign for the chief curator, taking a convoluted, crowded route through parties of schoolchildren and women like herself, carrying shopping bags. At the glass cases with the animal specimens she stops. She drops her bags of clothes. She holds a hand up to her mouth because they are all here, her lost babies, as carefully catalogued and displayed as the other exhibits. *Foetuses*, the museum has labelled them, *Lewisian nice*. They are preserved in jars of liquid, with a card showing the year of their conception and a picture of the fruit or vegetable of corresponding size displayed adjacent. The kidney bean, the blueberry, the walnut and, the last and worst loss, the baking potato. These are mine, Joan says to a woman who has appeared next to her. These belong to me, they shouldn't be here. She tries to walk to the curator's office but the direction signs have gone. She can't move her legs and she can't find her bags and she is telling herself that she should have seen this coming.

Joan opened her eyes to a cool grey daylight. The rain hadn't let up. She wasn't in pain, no physical sign of the thing she feared. But still she did not know. Alec moved a little, and she turned to him and whispered.

'I have to tell you something,' she said.



They talked until it was time for Alec to get ready for work. He called her during his lunch break and they spoke more over dinner, about different things, and late into the evening.

‘Look at the sky,’ he said. ‘We should go outside.’

Joan was already in her nightdress. She pulled on a coat and slipped on some wellingtons. They walked to the fence at the end of the croft through cool clover-scented air.

‘The sheep will be wondering what’s got into us,’ Joan said, but she realised that was untrue, the sheep accepted whatever came to pass. They had a better form of rumination.

They sat together on a wooden pallet and raised their eyes to the view above. The stars were dense in the sky. Joan remembered how empty the sky in Glasgow had seemed, a couple of stars and the moving lights of aircraft being all that penetrated the permanent glow over the city. She thought about how different skies might change how you feel, and whether a star-filled sky or an emptier one would make you feel smaller.

Alec was watching her. ‘What are you thinking?’ he said.

She looked up again.

‘We really have no idea, do we,’ said Joan. ‘Down here. We just haven’t a clue.’