

## September by Grace Campbell

After she has dropped Jake and Liam near the school gate – a discreet distance away, so they don't have to suffer the indignity of being publicly seen to have a mother – and run by the locksmiths to pick up a new spare key, Liam having lost his at football practice on Tuesday – only after she has done these things, at a slow but steady pace, and with only a slightly more frequent than usual glance at her watch, does she turn the car at the roundabout and begin the drive out of town towards the bypass. It is crisp, sunlit September weather and this is something she will remember later – the way we remember things, not because they seem like a portent, but precisely because they seem to foretell nothing – but for just now she is thinking about the chicken she will have to take out of the fridge later for dinner, and about whether Mark will be in a good mood when he comes home, something she often thinks she can sense simply by the sound of his key in the lock. Then she remembers that when Jake first started at school she would always feel slightly incredulous that when she saw his small back disappear through the front door (for those were the days she used to see him off from inside the gate) he did not vanish completely, resurrected from non-being only by the sight of her, standing in the same spot several hours later. This incredulity wasn't helped by the fact that he was always one of these children who adapt uncomplainingly to every new circumstance, hardy and self-sufficient as a desert plant. Everything was 'good,' or 'fine,' or 'ok,' and only through relentless interrogation on the drive home could he be coaxed into giving particulars. She used to scan his face sidelong, trying to see in that placid blue gaze some assurance of need, of fears to be comforted, hurts to be soothed. When she found none, it seemed at times like a wilful withholding – a cruelty, even.

But her real problem when Jake was at school was what to do with herself all day. That is: after the ironing had been done and the kitchen cleaned and the morning television had ended. She had remembered years ago she had been a voracious reader and took herself to Waterstones, but the amount of new books in the shop bewildered her, and so she contented herself with re-reading old ones she had lying around the house, some of which she had read for the first time as a teenager. Other times she bought Heat or Cosmo, which she read with a fascination that was more anxious than

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pleasurable. Before one had to be good in bed, sexy and beautiful – a message that could be safely disdained – but now one had to be a high flying-lawyer or a health foods guru or a humanitarian slash actress and also be good in bed, sexy and beautiful and derive from these things a nebulous feeling called empowerment. She always hid these magazines from Mark in the drawer of her dresser; for him to see her reading them would have felt like a kind of exposure.

And then a year after Jake started school Liam was born. He was a colicky, jaundiced baby, but soon emerged as a robust child of a similar disposition to Jake, as if his infant infirmity had been but a false start. And by the time Liam, too, was old enough to start school, she had started work again: a bit of temping here and there, and then a part-time job as a legal secretary at the solicitor's on the high street. (That was before she had gotten sick, of course.) But one remains always a little sceptical that the child one gave birth to has a bona fide existence of its very own, one resistant to even motherhood's most jealous claims. Even now the boys are gangly and Jake's voice is lurching comically about the vocal scale she is incredulous, but now it is a wry incredulity, because she knows what no one had ever told her: that to be a mother is to be in perpetual unrequited love.

She has lived here, in this town, since she was a child, apart from a few years spent at university in London, which she hated. It is a mid-size market town, just that little bit too far from London for people to commute, cradled by the long arm of the bypass on one side and the green belt on the other. The houses on the outskirts, which she is now driving past, are the largest, set amongst woodland and large gardens, some of which even have swimming pools – or so it is said. Sometimes she, Mark and the boys – although Jake less and less these days – go on weekend walks down by the river near here, Mark having an evangelical belief in the benefits of fresh air and exercise. The houses round about are mostly new-builds and most of them are very ugly – their defining features being their largeness, their squareness, and the obvious wealth of their owners – but in Mark's gaze she can see him unfavourably contrasting them with their own house; its walls grubby with handprints, the muddy football boots by the door, the kitchen that has been begging to be re-done since they moved in. And it has gotten more pronounced since he was passed over for promotion at

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work a few months ago. The promotion went to a friend of his, a man she has always disliked quietly, although she would have found it difficult to articulate why (if pressed, she might have said it was something about his mannerisms, which are all glossed with a subtle yet unmistakable patina of smugness) and whom she can tell Mark, too, dislikes, although he would consider admitting this dislike a kind of defeat. They were a little less tight for money when she was working, too, but after she got sick she had to stop. Even though she is now recovered she hasn't gotten round to getting her job back, and she can tell this also eats at Mark.

Now she is at the stretch of road where the Polish and Romanian farm workers come and line up in the early mornings, looking for a farmer to come pick them up for a job; or where they used to line up – perhaps the vote has changed that. It is a stretch occupied by warehouses, empty lots, office buildings, and then beyond, the fields, today with smoke coiling from them where the farmers are burning leaves. The vote was the first thing her and Mark had ever argued about even remotely related to politics. She had assumed he was voting the same way as her; she was surprised, then, when she alluded to the matter in passing and found him disagreeing with her. A tone of defensive truculence entered his voice when he spoke about it that was new to her, but not as disconcerting as the deference he suddenly seemed to have for certain politicians, when the touchstone of both of their backgrounds was that politicians were not to be trusted. Eventually she stopped raising the issue and contented herself with troubling over it in silence. There was something she had always despaired of in herself: porousness, pliancy, as though there was no centre to her at all. She was always vacillating towards whatever people wanted from her in that moment.

When she got sick, though – around the time the vote was taking place – she was thrust, suddenly, into the selfish role of an invalid. When her hair started falling out she realised the visibility of sickness, how it marked you out. Before, she had had a body; now, she was a body. She was someone people spoke to with uneasy kindness in shops, and talked about, no doubt, behind her back – “Did you hear about Emma Aspen? Ovarian cancer,” – the way she had once talked about other people, with a kind of pity that was half-performance, half-superstition, like knocking on wood.

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She is on the bypass now, and she reaches over and switches on the radio and switches through channels, searching for a song she recognises, but there is nothing. She can feel her nerves rising now, just slightly, as she comes into view of the hospital. It is a large concrete building on the outskirts of the next town over, with a new wing fronted entirely with glass, which is where the cancer ward is. She has never felt the horror some people feel in hospitals – like Mark, who was in a state of constant agitation during both Jake and Liam’s births – but that was before she had spent significant amounts of time in one. For her, it is less some atavistic terror of the smell of sickness and more a foot-dragging reluctance that reminds her of how she used to feel going to school in the mornings; an irritation as much as a dread.

The receptionist has a slightly harried, apologetic look when she tells her to take a seat, which she realises is most probably in reference to a steadily loudening noise that, when she moves down the corridor, turns out to be coming from a man seated in one of the chairs – a middle-aged man in a smart suit, who is weeping loudly and with abandon, while a nurse leans in towards him and speaks to him in a low murmuring voice and the people walking by look straight ahead with the set expressions generally assumed when passing a homeless person in the street. She finds herself horribly entranced by the weeping, which is of the red-faced, open-mouthed variety one generally sees in very young children: the utter abandon of it, its rhythmic rise and fall. She has the fancy that if she sits there and listens hard enough, she might hear in the crying some fundamental and wordless truth, like a secret chord in music. But like someone breaking a spell, Dr Omaboe sticks his head out of the door and beckons her inside. “Sorry about that,” he says.

“How are we today, Emma?” Dr Omaboe asks.

“I’m well,” she says. “How are you?”

“That’s good to hear,” he says. “How are the kids?”

“They’re good too.” And then, because that seems an unsatisfactory answer, she says: “Causing trouble as usual.” Dr Omaboe acknowledges this with a polite laugh. Many married women, she knows, are prone to cultivating small infatuations like allotments, always on safely unattainable men – married women, like her, who do

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not have the temperament for all the sordid banalities of an affair. If she had been someone else, Dr Omaboe, with his deep voice and measured way of talking and prominently displayed gold wedding band might have been like the distilled essence of such vague clandestine longings. But she has never been one for crushes – never been able to rid herself of the voice in her head that says *Really?* and *You?* and *Look at yourself, for God's sake* – even before she was a married woman of forty-seven, even when she was twenty-three, even when the man in question was not her cancer doctor who had seen her trussed on an operating table like a slab of meat.

Then she realises something. There is something too hesitant, too deliberate about his politeness.

“Are you here alone, Emma?”

“Yes,” she says. “Why?”

Dr Omaboe fiddles with his wedding ring, a habitual gesture of his. “Tell me what exactly you have been expecting from this appointment.”

“Just a routine check-up,” she says. “Just to check it hasn't come back. The cancer.”

“The thing is, Emma, I'm afraid it has. Come back, I mean.”

He takes out scans, and points to the tumour, which resembles a darkish bloom, like a stain on a carpet, which, he says, has spread and may have become resistant to treatment. As he talks she finds her gaze drifting to the framed abstract watercolour above his head, which is strips of orange and purple arranged in way that looks like a sunset over a lake, or maybe a ladder, and which reminds her of another painting that had hung in the room where she received chemo, that was blue and green and (she realises) most probably by the same artist. At first she had resented the painting for its blandness, its obvious air of conciliatory assurance. It had obviously been painted for Sick People – who were a monolith, not to be troubled by gaudy colours or distressing subject matter. But then that resentment had progressed to resignation and the resignation to a kind of acceptance, or maybe the grim comradeship soldiers feel for each other in battle.

Dr Omaboe is saying, “Do you understand? I know this is a shock,” and then he talks more, about treatment plans, and dates.

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“Yes,” she says, “Yes, of course.”

“Do you have any questions? Anything you want to know?”

She has no questions. She shakes her head. Dr Omaboe scrutinises her.

“Do you have someone to pick you up, maybe? Your husband?”

“He’s at work.” Then she says, “Am I going to die?”

The question sounds plaintive, pathetic, and she instantly regrets asking it. Dr Omaboe adjusts his wedding band again.

“As I said, it is operable,” he says. “And we have a great team here, who are going to do our hardest to fight it.” Pause. “But I have to be frank with you, Emma. The success rates of this procedure are sitting somewhere at ten per cent. You understand – I can’t make promises, when we’re working with these odds. I’m very sorry.”

“That’s alright,” she says, absurdly. And she cringes, as though a thousand eyes were trained on her, lacerating her skin. If she might be dying – if that is indeed what he is telling her – then it is mortifying. To do something so ostentatious as dying – to have to tell people – to feel their pity.

And then (oh God) there is Jake and Liam. She sees their faces in her mind eye and thinks, inexplicably, *I’m sorry I’m so sorry* – but her mind pulls back abruptly from the thought, as though she has accidentally touched a hot stove. Later, she will think about that later.

The crying man is no longer in the corridor; presumably having been ushered off to a private room somewhere. In the car, she places her forehead against the steering wheel. She stays like that for five or ten minutes, and when she lifts her head up a man getting out of the car beside her is staring at her. Embarrassed, she starts the engine and pulls out of the car park.

But instead of starting towards home she finds herself driving a different direction, into the centre of town. She parks in the main square, near the fountain, and gets out of the car, blinking a little in the sunlight. There is a small cafe with metal seats outside gleaming in the sunshine and she sits down in one of them. The waiter is in his early twenties, a student perhaps, and she wonders (still with a curious

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dispassion, as though she is considering someone else's life, or rather, someone else's death) whether she will live to see the boys off at university; which makes her begin to worry about Liam and his dyslexia and how Mark won't push for him to get extra help—he has always said she comes on too strong at the school, she coddles Liam too much, that he has to learn to stand on his own two feet and hell mend him if he doesn't. But then she realises one of the few advantages to dying (possibly dying) is that you can make people promise to do things for you. And as she is thinking these things, the young man asks: "What can I get you?" and she opens her mouth to ask for a cappuccino, but instead she says, "I'll have a glass of white wine, please." He gives her a quick glance and she remembers that it still might be too early to be drinking (she has no idea what time it is, in fact) and suddenly she sees herself as if from the outside: a small neat woman, perhaps rather younger looking than she is, but beyond that, nothing about her excessive in any way. Everything about her is attended by a caveat: attractive enough, but not beautiful; well dressed, but not stylish; affluent, but not wealthy. And she wonders if everyone's feelings about the possibility of their own premature death resemble nothing so much as that sensation you get sometimes on waking up at five in the morning, when you lie there running through all the things you have to do that day and mentally checking them off on a list. The waiter brings her a large glass of the house white, placing it in front of her with what she imagines is a conspiratorial smile, and she smiles back automatically, because after all even if one is (possibly) dying, there's no need to be rude. "Tough day?" he asks and she says, "Yes, you could say that," and then across the road a busker starts tunelessly playing the flute and she thinks that she has always known exactly what was for her, exactly what she could allow herself to want or even imagine herself wanting in her secluded innermost self. She has always been sensible; so sensible she has been a little ridiculous; and in the end it was no protection. And then she finishes her glass of wine and then she wonders what's to stop her from having another one, and maybe even another one, and another one, and not stop: to go out with a bang, as they say, or rather, with a sad yet valiant fizzle. But then there would be something very melodramatic about all that. What she will do is go home, take the chicken out of the freezer for dinner, unload and then reload the dishwasher, and then there will be a few

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hours to kill before she has to go pick up the boys from school, and that will give her ample time to rehearse what she will say to Mark. She starts sketching a rough draft in her head, leaving pauses to allow him space to react, rephrasing certain words, softening some parts; by the time she has paid and is once more sat in the car the speech is half-written, and she starts the engine.