
NICK HOLDSTOCK

The Embrace

THERE IS NO EXCUSE: buildings have windows, roofs, and stairs; roads have lorries and cars. In her house there are knives, pills, and bleach. There is a gas oven. If after two years, Heather is not dead, it is because she's a coward. All she does is say her prayers before she goes to bed. *Dear no one, dear nothing, let something burst while I sleep. It does not need to be my heart, just an artery.*

But every night her body fails her. Every day, she wakes.

She gets up and goes into the bathroom where there is a high window. *Open it and fly beyond*, say several bars of soap. Why is it these things that speak? Why not the shampoo?

She sits on the toilet, water leaves her. She flushes and puts down the lid. What was a toilet is now a step, which leads to another, as it does on a scaffold. She climbs up and opens the window; the sky is full of white clouds except for a gap that beckons. It will close, and never reopen, and so she must hurry. All she need do is lean out; gravity will help.

The problem is that the hole is over a cloud, which is above a roof, a window, a stretch of wall, a plaque that says 1898. There is then another window, an intervening branch, and finally, the school yard, or part of it, a narrow stretch between portacabin and fence, and soon a bell will ring.

Heather climbs down, then turns on the shower. She takes off her underwear, waits—the water may still be cold—then gets into the bath. The water is warm, then properly hot, and it does not take long to wash. Soap on her face, soap under her arms, soap between her legs. Once this chore is done, she can close her eyes. Focus on water meeting her skin, the paths it takes down her back and arms, the glide of it down her legs. She does not think, hear words, see pictures. She is held by water.

When she was growing up, her parents' house didn't have a real shower, just a forked plastic tube stuck onto the bath taps. She didn't have a proper shower until she was nine. That was the year she decided to stop being fat. She gave up biscuits and sweets. She made her mother drive her to the pool each morning. There she

traveled up and down her lane, upheld and surrounded by water she kicked and pushed aside.

Heather stands under the shower till the water runs cold. When she gets out, she is shivering, and there must be clean clothes in the drawer. But it will take too long to look, and she is cold, so she puts on yesterday's clothes. She dries her hair, then goes to the hall mirror and puts on the wig. It is made from nice, human hair, and she thinks of the woman—tall, beautiful, but completely bald—and a laugh rises in her. Through the lungs, past the trachea, up and out like some billiard ball she has only this chance to expel. At home, it is safe to do this. She does not do so in public, not anymore, partly because her laugh is neither glad nor infectious, just a craven gulping of breath. The other, greater reason is that people seem to be of the opinion—she knows, because she was one of them—that if Sofia, your daughter, your flaxen-haired six-year-old, is killed in front of you, this is the end of laughter. If this happens, you must turn your face to the wall. Life cannot continue.

“But,” says Heather, and opens the door. Then quickly closes her mouth. Because someone could be in the stairwell. Except this is the point of speaking: to communicate. If she meets someone in the corridor or on the stairs she will tell them how awful she feels. So what if they don't want to hear. They need to be reminded that years of effort can vanish in a second. That everything you worked for, everything you valued—the promotion you worked eleven-hour days to get, the man you made dump his fiancée—can suddenly seem worthless.

Unfortunately, Heather sees no one on the way out. She must remain as mute as those women in novels of misery set in the 1950s, those Canadian or Irish martyrs who cannot escape their abusive fathers or husbands, their strict communities. No single shaft of light—not the song of a bird or a winter sunset or the pleasure offered by hot water and fingers—can enter their fictional lives.

Bullshit, she thinks, and laughs again. Despair is not like that. It is crying till you vomit, it is being cut from inside. It is screaming to drown out your thoughts. But even when one's capacity for happiness seems wholly amputated, even then there are brutal moments when a cat unwinds from a tree and before you can think you have knelt and run your hand through its fur. And though the feeling at such times is neither bright nor shining, it is still a balm.

She walks to the end of her street, then stops. How fast the cars on the road. Like hurry given a shape. Flashes of blue, red, sometimes yellow, and always those black taxis. Their orange, evil eyes. She looks left, then right, and the street seems clear, but still she walks on farther, to the pedestrian crossing, although it is the

wrong direction. There she presses the button and waits while others simply cross. Only when the green man appears does she step out. It has only added a minute to her journey, but it may be decisive. She may be too late.

She walks along the edge of the park and does not see autumn, the copper leaf carpet, the bare branches against a sky so blue it screams. She is walking so fast that her feet hurt, but what she should do is run. Because sometimes they are let out early, sometimes she is too late. Then her head feels as if it's under a pillow that someone is pressing down. She is suffocating, cannot breathe, but it is worse than real suffocation: That, at least, would end.

Her shoes are loud on the pavement. People stare, they laugh. Not at her but with whoever they're talking to on their phone. And it always delighted Sofia that someone who was not there could still speak. She thought it funny that her father was so far away it would take twenty-four of their bus rides to reach him, in Canada, where it was cold, and bears lived on the streets.

By now, the school bell should have rung. What if it is broken, or someone forgot? What if the children have already been picked up? Then she will have to endure the afternoon, evening, night, and morning with the pillow over her face. And it will be her fault alone.

"You stupid cow," she says, and two girls turn. They see nothing interesting: just a middle-aged woman in tears. Pointless to cry, useless to scream, the milk, the blood, was long ago spilled. The school yard will be empty; Sofia is dead.

She passes the newsagents, dry cleaners, and chip shop. She presses the button that stops the murderous traffic, the button that is metal, cold, and keeps her fingerprint. And as green gives way to amber she notices the women in coats and scarves, the two fathers by the school gate. When the light turns red she steps forward and knows a zephyr of relief. A lessening of pressure, a needful breath, and then relief is displaced by guilt. She means no harm, she *does* no harm, and yet she knows this is a mistake. *Be true to thine own suffering*: That is what people expect. If she lifts the load from her shoulders, breathes normally, laughs, smiles, she betrays Sofia's death. She is not supposed to feel pleasure: It insults the pain.

She looks at her watch. Five minutes remain. She puts a cigarette in her mouth, then lights it. As she moves the lighter to her pocket, she burns her hand on the top, and without thinking, lets go. As she bends to retrieve it, she places a hand on her head. She doesn't think she needs the wig, and only wears it from habit. In the six months she's been coming, no one has said a word. Nobody will notice her, not the teachers, not the parents. They are not vigilant for pedophiles and

kidnappers. They have come for that moment when their child spots them, when they are recognized, when someone is happy to see them.

The school bell rings, but it isn't a bell, just an electric line, a blade that falls, cutting *before* and *after*. To the children it means that something is over, to the parents, the teachers, that something continues. Back to home and lunch and TV, and this is what the children run toward, not their parents, waiting with hands in pockets or talking on phones and here and there, the sensible, with arms fucking outstretched. The children burst out the doors and are told not to run but still they streak across her vision, a pink blur, a green, and their voices fill the air like an argument of birds. There is a hope that lives in the scene, something that starts to loop her intestines round its fingers, thumbs, and toes, pulling, then yanking, and once or twice, at the start of this term, she had to go off and vomit.

Because there is only one girl here who matters. She is five, maybe six, her name is Tessa, and she looks nothing like Sofia. But resemblance is not in the hair or face, but a light that lives in the person entire. Though Tessa has black hair, not blond, and is a slighter, more doll-like girl than Sofia, she is still her echo. She stands in the center of the playground. She cannot see her mother, whose blue Volkswagen is nowhere in sight, but it is too early to worry: There are still many children running, laughing, moving in her orbit.

Heather steps close to the chain link fence, then presses her face against it. Though she is only inches nearer, she no longer sees the fence. There is nothing to interrupt the quotidian sight of a girl in a playground full of boys and girls, a girl who is not levitating or speaking Creole or doing anything unexpected. She is looking at her feet while hopping, first on her left foot, then on her right, and it is banal, and it is a wonder. Heather cannot see the look on her face, but she can imagine it. In some other, better, former life she went to galleries and stared at shepherds and magi gathered round a holy infant. Pictures that seemed dull, repetitive, and when she herself became a mother, her expression was far from beatific. Fourteen hours of labor left her weeping, drained, and angry—at the doctors for not speeding things up, at her body for taking so long. After the birth she was depressed for months, but she pushed herself through the days. And she loved Sofia, of that she has no doubt. But when you are constantly having to take care of a child—to make sure she is properly fed, warm, safe, and happy, that she is not ill, that she has toys and books and games and friends and that these friends and their parents can be trusted, that there are no wineglasses or medicine left within reach, that the dog she is petting is not bad-tempered, that the locks on

her window are closed—when you are solely responsible for such things, because the father has decided to stay in Canada with a woman he met on a train, there is rarely the time or energy to feel the undiluted awe she feels while watching Tessa. She has not even spoken to this girl, has never been closer than ten feet to her, but still the sight of Tessa tilting her head to watch the flock streaking above, the slow turn of her head to track them as they circle, is enough to make Heather giddy. And this is sick, horrible, unquestionably *wrong*. This joy would not exist unless she were otherwise miserable. It only exists because Sofia saw a Husky on the other side of the road and was so excited that she pulled her hand from Heather's and dashed into the road. It only exists because the taxi was going so fast.

And when people—may God forgive them—ask her if she has a child, she says that she does. She has a child who died. She does not have Tessa, who is not Sofia, but for five seconds or a minute or ten, she borrows the girl with her eyes and her heart. The burden lifts and she laughs and laughs without ever opening her mouth. It is a purely physical kind of relief. The pain is still there, the wound is still there, but briefly it is not felt.

She should not come. She has tried not to, she has. But it is like trying to stay outside in the cold, the chill she has been in for so long, and she is nearly there, she can almost lie down, close her eyes, but there is the glow from the fire. The smile on the face of Tessa who is chewing her sleeve. Without this, she could stay in the cold, find the courage, or perhaps despair, that would let her find sleep.

The playground begins to empty. Tessa looks around, then down at her shoes, and then begins to walk. Her black shoes skip between the painted white lines on the ground, and at first it seems like she is playing some private game where the lines are like ropes on an obstacle course, or simply must not be stepped on because they would say *Ouch*. Then she is running, hurting the lines; she must have seen her mother. A tall woman with light brown hair whose long nose and thin cheeks give her face a sharpness that is probably undeserved. Even when she looks exhausted, beaten by life, she hugs and kisses Tessa. Which does not prove she is a good mother. But it suggests love.

Whatever Tessa is running toward, it is not her mother. This is clearly one of those actions caused by that energy which builds in a child till it demands release. When they hurl the doll against the wall, sweep the dishes from the table, launch themselves into the road. Though there are other adults standing at the gate, none are waving or smiling. No one is paying attention. Tessa is a toy wound up too far and soon the key in her back will slow and she will come to a halt. But she does

not. She runs round a green circle painted on the ground, follows the back of a snake. If anything, she seems to be getting faster, as if the gears and cogs that move her are out of control. Something as fragile and precious as Tessa should not be moving so fast. How little it would take—a hard surface, a metal corner—to stop her permanently.

And Tessa has finished running the snake. She is aimed at the gate. Her shoes are shiny, black with a strap and what if she— What if she—and it was an accident. If she did, if she was. Then Heather probably could. A window or a truck or bleach; the gas turned up to mark nine.

She watches the blur of Tessa's shoes. They shine and wink in the sun. Running, running, moving faster. Tessa reaches the gate. Where she is sure to be stopped by a teacher or parents. But the teacher's back is turned; the two parents are whispering, paying no attention. Tessa is the unstoppable force in search of an immovable object. She is on the pavement. Moving between parked cars.

Tessa's scream is a knife in their ears. It means they have failed. For a child to be making such a noise suggests that every adult, whether parent, teacher, or passerby, has failed to do the basic, vital task of protecting the vulnerable.

Except that Tessa is not screaming in pain. She is just surprised to be in the arms of a stranger. Perhaps she believes what Heather is saying. That she is safe, she is safe.

And Heather should put her down. In a moment, she will. But Tessa's hair smells of coconut. Her forehead is too soft. Heather knows she is not holding Sofia. She knows her girl is still dead. But feelings are different from truth. Holding Tessa is like holding Sophia, not the same, but close. She shuts her eyes and floats in a moment that is barely the present, so little does life intrude. If only she could stay in this moment. If she could just die now.