

The Recovery Position

I made the decision around a month after Jane left. In truth, it's entirely possible that I made the decision months before, my choice manifested in blank expressions and non-committal replies; vague excuses and general disinterest. However, it is only with the benefit of hindsight that I observe these first symptoms, if indeed it can be called such a thing, being as I am here witnessing them as they occur.

But no, at the time I had more pressing matters to contend with, not least of which was the bottle of *Glenlivet* I was making good headway with, an anniversary present from some years past.

Jane always seemed to encourage my enthusiasm for drink, despite her public disdain for my habit, although I wonder if she was even aware. Certainly, she seemed to prefer the passion an alcoholic stupor induced in me, deliberately mistaking my inebriated ranting for an interest in, and engagement with, the wider world.

In fact, the drinking only aided my withdrawal from the universe; a comfortable barrier creating an isolated kingdom of one where, naturally, I would be ruler. The month since she had left had only exacerbated my problem, as I then saw it, and I was indulging every day. Whilst previous weeks had at least seen me bother to go into work, if nothing else, the past seven days had been an experiment in total isolation, not even bothering to leave the house. I had taken to sleeping throughout the daylight hours, spending my nights drinking and rifling half-heartedly through old things, the activity an excuse to keep a drink by my side.

It was such an occasion that night; I topped up my tumbler and took a deep drag of the hash I had persuaded Geoff, a friend from the office, to bring round for me. He had commented, at the time, on my dilapidated appearance, despite it only being days since he had last seen me, and I had waved him away with merely a grunt. No visitors would interrupt the reverie I had planned that night.

My wish was not to come true, however; outside, the bins clattered and bags rustled, breaking the sainted silence I had crafted for myself within my head. I glanced out the kitchen window, ready to curse the miserable February weather, with all its sleet and wind making my regular journeys to the off-license ever more unbearable. Jane often complained that I never bothered with the shopping, but even now, within my kingdom of self, I had rectified that problem, although my choice of groceries no doubt left much to be desired.

I edged closer to the window, leaning over the sink to get a better view. I could just about make out the imposing silhouette of the wheelie bin and the embarrassing cluster of tied-up carrier bags I had adorned it with, although the meagre light from the street barely reached the alley by the side of my house. I cursed my laziness in not installing that light, before rapidly realising I no longer cared.

I was about to turn away, the lure of my inner world too much to resist, when the bags rustled once more; my head snapped back towards the window, flecks of scotch on my lips, and I could have sworn I saw a woman.

She was old, with a pinched face that protruded forward into some kind of snout, the point of her nose and elevation of her lips seeming to taste the air, her

shallow chin gently sloping down to be hidden by the voluminous rags she seemed to wear about herself. The back of her head was hidden to me by a shawl of some kind that also rode about her shoulders and gave her an almost regal bearing. There was movement about where her feet would have been, the rustling of bags and the empty echo of the wheelie bin shifting in place.

All my notions of self went out the window as my middle-class suburban outrage began to rear its head within me; quite apart from the health implications, it was simply not on for someone like that to be sleeping near peoples' bins of a night. Certainly not on this street.

Buoyed by the drink and light-headed from the hash, I made for the side-door, meaning to remonstrate with this woman. Already I began to miss the certainty that my new inner life had given me, and resented this interloper for daring to draw me back out again into the realm of people.

I grabbed a nearby broom and made for the bins, indignation brewing in my veins, but upon reaching the bins there was no one to be seen. Instead, sitting proudly amongst the shredded cartons and torn plastic bags, was a rather large fox.

While she eyed me suspiciously from her mound of detritus three smaller foxes rooted around, tearing open fresh bags like children at Christmas; another sniffed at a carcass of rotted meat, a rotisserie chicken I had bought at the chip shop two days earlier, and they all fought over a sealed packet of uneaten liver from almost two months ago, found in the freezer for when Jane's parents might visit and consigned to the rubbish by me in the Great Clear-Out.

I paused, uncertain what to make of this. My senses had been primed for human interaction, verbal and possibly physical, and this sight of the natural world invading what I had considered my habitat perturbed me. My graces eluded me, and I no longer knew how to behave.

The mother fox continued to stare; I say 'mother' because she looked on me almost as one of her own; a matronly gaze that seemed both sympathetic and confused; why are you holding that object? What are you doing?

Helpless, I stared back. In those eyes I couldn't even begin to describe what I saw; suffice to say that staring into the eyes of any lover, any spouse, even any enemy, never held such dissonant feelings; fear and courage; hate and love; freedom and control; for a moment it's possible that I surrendered.

Then something reasserted itself in me; possibly the selfishness I had been cultivating so long indoors, possibly my societal programming detecting an attack on its network and fighting to preserve all that it had compelled me to do, some last ditch attempt to stop me teetering completely over the edge and into something new. Something unknown.

Lashing out with the broom, I made some sort of noise from within my throat; my brain thought it was language, a variant of 'get out of here' or something similar; my lips clearly thought otherwise, as did my tongue, although again with that devil known as hindsight I can clearly see that I was only going through the initial stages; the birth pangs.

The creatures paused in their endeavour and stared at me like their mother; there was no fear or startlement in their faces, only disappointment. Perhaps a degree of puzzlement as well, as if to ask why I was acting in this strange way. What was wrong with me?

I stabbed the broom towards the mother, identifying her as the ring-leader, a motion which she swiftly dodged. With a fluid movement she slipped past my lunge with an open, growling mouth, and something nicked the index finger of my right hand, which held the broom. I dropped it, more out of surprise than pain, and clutched my hand, searching for the wound.

By the time I had identified the tiny scratch, either from a claw or tooth, and chided myself for my lack of cool, the family had vanished. I stood in the alley surveying the devastation of torn bags and exposed food waste, bathed in dim orange light.

I returned to the kitchen and finished the scotch.

Three days later and I was in the supermarket. The last week had seen an immense improvement in my ability to move around. The house now felt like a pen, a prison, that I had voluntarily interred myself within. The thoughts I had in those days now seemed stupid to me as I found myself itching to get out of the house.

However, my distaste for the daylight had not gone; in fact, it had increased, as had my tolerance for other people. I craved the outside, that much was sure, but my only trips were taken at night, where I bounded from shadow to shadow, making sure to take the dimmest backstreets and walking with the quietest steps. The glance of another human was met with a flinch and here, in the supermarket, the bright lights placed halos over everything I looked at, my dark glasses barely shielding me from miles of strip-lighting.

My food supplies had dwindled awfully in the last few days and in order to stop myself wasting away to nothing I had forced myself into a shop that wasn't called *Thresher's* or *Unwin's*. The shelves of goods, the piped music, the lack of shadows in which to *avoid people*, all conspired to make this the most terrifying trip I had made in weeks.

I found myself looking down the aisle towards the entrance/exit of the shop; trolley ahead of me, my brain was taken by ancient impulses and I began to walk forwards. Escape was the only option.

The strange calm that accompanies a mental panic stayed with me as I pushed past the queue at the checkout with my rather full trolley, and stayed with me even as I pushed it out to the car park and began planning my route into the shadows, and calm, where I would begin my feast.

Shouts behind me; adrenaline flooded my system as I realised that I was being chased; two burly security men, avoiding slow-moving cars and trying to contain their wobbling bodies.

Glancing around me for options, I spied a wall which led on to a nearby council estate which was just high enough for me to climb but which would no doubt confound my portly rescuers. I snatched a packet of parma ham from the trolley, placed it into my firmly locked jaws and began a sprint for the wall.

Out of nowhere a Ford Focus appeared, apparently trying to park in a disabled space; I vaulted over the bonnet almost before I had realised it was there, and made the last dash of ten yards or so to the wall. There, I leapt onto the bonnet of an old Volkswagen Golf and used the momentum to propel me over the wall without even touching the brickwork.

I landed on bent knees on the other side, packet of ham still clutched tightly in my mouth, and ran off through the winding alleys of the estate, the cries of my pursuers impotent in their sheer distance from me.

I brushed grass from my mattress and plumped up my pillows some more. Comfortable, I took the open packet of pork steak and pushed my nose into the torn cellophane covering. It smelt about two weeks old and the rich, rotting stench made my mouth water and my lower jaw quiver. I had been eating like a king for weeks now, none of my neighbours any the wiser.

I had moved my bed outside, the better to feel the wind on my skin, on the sensitive hairs on the back of my neck. My senses felt alive out here, even in sleep; twice, now, I had deterred would-be burglars simply by growling from my perch by the shed. No doubt they were encouraged by the house laying empty for weeks now, and the various open windows. It would seem to anyone like it was up for grabs, but little did they know I had every intention of returning, once I had a family. Even now I was conditioning the rooms, opening them to the elements so my little ones could experience both a sense of shelter and also the awareness that I felt, out here, surrounded by the constantly shifting breeze, the scuttling insects and endless potential threats that lay somewhere out of range, waiting for us to let down our guard.

As I tucked in to the pork steak I began to slow my sense of time, better to enjoy this meal. After all, I had no idea how long until the next one, although my neighbour's rubbish bins often yielded tasty treats; their waste, my spoils.

Time was now almost an optional thing; I could spend hours lying in wait, belly down on the soil, watching the wind sail through the blades of grass, a leaf falling slowly from a branch high up, and yet it would seem to me as if barely a second had passed. Similarly, I could pluck a gnat from the air, its movements appearing to me as slow-motion, drunk and clumsy. I had mastered my inner-world, that kingdom of one in which I had sought to dwell, and had now found a way to inflict it on the external world. I felt there was no end to what I could accomplish here and soon the time would come to share it with someone else.

I sank my teeth into the rotting meat, letting all its exquisite flavours wash over my tongue. I devoured the two steaks hungrily and naturally my attentions turned to acquiring more.

It was just then that I turned to the alleyway that led from the garden to the road; the clatter of a bin, the rustle of bags, a familiar scent making its way across the breeze.

I went to investigate, nose twitching and muscles tensed. I saw her where she had been before, older, yet still regal. She lay now, where before she had stood, and her snout had become slightly pinched. As it rose into the air, seeking answers, she seemed ever more elderly and helpless. My heart gave a small and significant tug.

She wore the gathered rubbish about her, almost like a shawl, and her children sniffed about the detritus, adding to her covering as she shivered against the cold. Her entire hind-quarters were covered with old newspapers and food cartons; beneath I could see matted fur and quivering flesh.

I knew then that she was dying, and I also knew that her children were not children any more. As one of her vulpine daughters placed a scrap of newspaper over her face, hiding her mother from the dying light, I managed to catch her eye.

The daughter regarded me suspiciously for a second, as if trying to place my face, my scent. Then she gave me what looked like a smile, a look of approval, and I looked back at the house that had once been my home.

Soon we would have our family.

Jane came to visit today. She was wearing a heavy overcoat and was accompanied by a large man who resembled a rugby player squeezed into a too-small suit. He wore a permanent grimace, as if charged by duty to do this one task, but that didn't mean he had to enjoy it.

Jane, for her part, wore very little expression on her face but mild surprise. She made her way from room to room, shivering against the cold, occasionally closing windows when she found them wide open. She wrinkled her nose at the state of the fridge, ran her finger along the dust that sat atop the television and looked with screw-eyed disappointment at the collection of green bottles on the kitchen sideboard.

It was only when she got to the living room and stared at the pale spaces on the wall where once photographs hung, that she gave a heavy sigh and allowed what seemed to be melancholy to pass across her face.

Satisfied, I turned from my perch on the garden wall and looked at my cubs. We would have to find a new house now, but that would be easy for the likes of us. I nuzzled my mate and the five of us leapt from the wall.

Time, and space, was now our playground; we left to play forever in the fields of the city.

Alexander Hayden James Smith, 31/03/2009