

Edward Ross

COOL IN THE RAIN

Leaning forward against the white cabinet, arms straight, shoulders hunched, palms flat against the dirty laminated surface. Half-used tube of toothpaste. A couple of toothbrushes by the sink. Part of a bar of pink soap sitting in the groove next to the tap. A humming—the fridge in the kitchen.

Staring at a pair of eyes.

The eyes are the window to the soul. Bullshit. Eyes tell you nothing. Nothing. And they never change. Have you ever stared at your eyes in the mirror? You can't get behind them. You stare at your eyes and they stare back at you. You slowly move your head, the eyes in the mirror swivel in their sockets. If you stare at them long enough they become someone else's eyes. It's like the mirror is a window, not the eyes, the eyes are a mirror. So you look at your eyes in the mirror, but the longer you stare at them the more alien they become. You begin to wonder what lurks behind them, those alien eyes, what that spooky weirdo dickhead in the mirror is thinking. And then suddenly it switches and they're your eyes again. But somehow you like the other eyes better. I don't know. Maybe it's just me.

She came home a couple of days ago. She seemed okay. I recognised her, but I didn't know her. I stopped knowing her a few years back. Before she left, even. So she was still a stranger when I saw her again.

That night, the night she came home, I woke to screaming. Really loud screaming. She wouldn't stop. On and on. Muffled voices from my parents' room. Doors being opened. Soft footsteps on the carpet. She just kept screaming.

At first it was the feeling you get when you're shocked out of sleep. Like the last time we all went to the farm together. I had this dream that I was walking through this green field, and it was a bit overcast and the light was fading but it was all very peaceful. And then there was a swamp, and there was this girl that I didn't recognize standing in the swamp. Her hair was long and hung heavy with mud and she was covered all over with mud and she was looking at me but I wasn't frightened. Then she opened her mouth and let out a horrible, horrible, piercing scream. I woke up and knew straight away something had woken me up, something from the real world. And with the image of that girl still in my mind I sat up in bed and looked around the room in the dark,

listening, waiting for some kind of sound to penetrate the still night air. There was only silence. And just when I began to wonder if it was really nothing, there was this tremendous bellow outside my window, an astonishing burst of sound that crashed its way through me. It lasted perhaps a second, but I felt its echo swimming inside me, circling around my entire body. I realised that it was just a sheep baaing, and I managed to force a timid bark of a laugh, but it was a long time before I got back to sleep. Of all the times when I was shocked out of sleep that holiday, it's ironic that it is the night of the sheep baaing which I recall the clearest. I guess all the other nights just sort of blurred together. But you never get used to it.

In her absence I'd almost forgotten that the sounds she could make during the night were so much more intense than anything that sheep could manage. Instead of a burst it was a relentless onslaught—the screaming just went on and on. And I didn't get the chance to laugh, not even a timid bark. And I waited for it to stop but it wouldn't stop. I sat up in bed, staring into the darkness, just like at the farm, only these were more familiar shapes—the dark outlines of the bookcases, the closet, the table with the TV and the computer on it, the junk on the floor, the open door with the jacket hanging on the handle.

It's the same every time. You want to bury your head in your pillow, but you also want to hear it, that alien sound, and you want to hear it stop, to know, to be sure that it *has* stopped. You start to lose control, your body starts to shake, you feel tears forming, and you don't know why, you just beg for it to stop. And eventually it exhausts itself. It dies down, becomes a sobbing, in response to a soothing adult voice, and *shhing*. The *shhing* works, and again you wonder why, what is it about that sound that can drown out a scream? So the screaming becomes a sobbing, and eventually that dies down too, and people go to bed, and people go to sleep. But you don't. You lie awake, empty, not thinking, just remembering that sound. And some of your muscles have spasms, not in a bad way, but in a funny way when you look at it objectively. Like when the dog gets scared of thunder.

The mornings are the worst. In the morning, nothing's happened. You don't talk about it, you talk about junk if you talk at all. About nothing. Not that you *want* to talk about it, Christ, anything but that. It's best when no one says a word. But then who can stand that plastic silence?

The mornings are hell on earth. So you get the fuck out of there. You go to your friend's place with the idea of getting smashed. Like at the Union night that time. The bands had all finished and everyone was leaving and we ran to the car park in the rain. Only Anton had to go back to find Olly, which left me alone, alone under the arch. There was no one else around. So I danced in the

rain, jumping around, laughing, spinning with my arms out and my face tilted up at the rain streaming down in the bright glare from the night-lights shining up into the sky. Feeling the drops of rain burst on my face. It looked so beautiful in that light, the rain. And the trees and the grass and the footpath—they were all lit by that white light, and they were wet and it was all very green. And my shirt was wet, and my hair, and my jeans, but that only made it better. It was great jumping around in the rain, laughing, talking, singing to myself. I fell over once on the cement walkway, jumping too much, but it didn't hurt, not till later, but fuck later. And then this guy walked out from the car park. I skipped away into the shadow of the overhanging trees, glancing back sheepishly, like I'd been sprung. And then he said it.

"Don't worry, mate. Be cool in the rain."

And so that's what I was. Cool in the rain.

So you go to your friend's place and you drink yourself out of it, hoping, perhaps, to re-live the bizarre ecstasy of that moment in the rain. So you stagger around your friend's place with the others, and make a lot of noise, and laugh at how you're all staggering around and making a lot of noise, and then you forget whether you're doing it deliberately or not. And you forget all the other things as well.

Eventually, though, everyone slows down, and so you just sit there cross-legged on the floor, late at night, the alcohol still working, and then suddenly you find yourself alone in a room full of people. And then there's nothing to stop it all come flooding back.

And so it's getting towards morning, with a little light filtering through the closed blinds in the lounge. And you can sense rather than hear the drizzle outside. The others are lying on couches wrapped in doonahs, having fallen asleep in front of the TV, or else they went to bed halfway through the movie and have collapsed on one of the mattresses in one of the rooms. You sit there, leaning against one of the couches, staring at the dust sparkling in the air, trying not to think about your stomach and the acidic taste in your mouth. You just listen to the regular breathing in the room and the occasional car slicing through the puddles on the road outside. One guy shifts on his couch, mumbles in his sleep.

You get up and pad down the hall, pressing your toes hard into the carpet for balance. You reach the kitchen, see the beginning of the morning through the window, the wet grass and the wet cement and the wet car and the wet tree and the soaked clothes hanging from the clothesline in the middle of the backyard.

You turn and enter the bathroom. Your feet curl up from the cold of the tiles. And you feel a bit sick, and you're tired, and everything is still a little strange from the alcohol. Strange but not as funny. And it's cold, and it's quiet, and you hover over the sink and look in the mirror.

And everything is still.

In that small rectangle of glass everything seems normal. You're normal, the shower-curtain hanging down into the bath behind you is normal, the window that for some reason is never closed is normal, and the blind billows out and gets sucked back in with a slap. But everything outside of that rectangle is still strange. And so you lean forward against the white cabinet, your palms wrapped around its edges, and you stare at those eyes in the mirror, those hypnotic, expressionless eyes.

Cool in the rain. If only I was cool in the rain.