

June Kant

EVENTIDE

The morning is wet and cheerless. Rivulets on my windowpane are diverted in their downward flow, chased sideways by gusts, obstructed. I watch umbrellas loom, tilt and splash past in haste. For the fortunate without time, loneliness is easier to bear. Me — I have time, and an eternity of hours to inhabit my loss.

A small plaintive sound and a bump against my leg remind me that it is late — I'm unshaven, not yet dressed, and the cat unfed. Tugging my robe about me closer, I grasp the fireplace mantle in passing and pause before the photographs. There she is with her Dutchman before they came to live next door. Kate, confined to one dimension, silenced under glass, strands of hair blown across her plump blonde face and naked throat. Her mouth is open, laughing, creasing her eyes to a gleam I know to be cornflower blue. They are well suited, kept in equipoise by opposite attractions and desires. And the boy. An enviable unity.

The cat's impatience can't be ignored and I shuffle behind the upright flag of her tail to the kitchen. They have been gone six months now; seems like a year. Why did I encourage her to see Johan's point of view? She resented his transfer — it interfered with her freelance photography, of course, and Josh. He was just settling into school. Yes, Cat, your meal is coming. You miss her too, don't you.

Cat has her milk but my morning fingers, worsened by this weather, struggle painfully with the tin opener. Kate opened them for me on the difficult days. Over a cuppa she'd write a shopping list of both our needs, then off she'd go with that camera weighing down her shopping bag. She'd be gone hours but bring back more than groceries: talk, an arpeggio of colour and contour, chiaroscuro, technicalities I have no knowledge of — it is that sheer enthusiasm I love, her radiance. And the glow she blew into the ashes of my life.

Slowly, clumsily, I dress and for want of direction return to my armchair by the front window. From here I will be able to see the postman when he comes. I tuck the rug around my shanks and reach automatically towards the folder of her torn-open letters from Holland.

Her first sparked enthusiasm — she hadn't wanted to go but, once there, could not but rejoice in that country's charm. It was later that she wrote of missing sunshine and only her most recent letters record the escalation of her discontent. Cat, don't dig your claws in, let me reach to find the last. If she

could see the misery of these days, the chill wetness — grey rain, grey street, all crouched under a low sky, tearing down the spirit — I won't remind her of the winters, nor this wearying wind.

Ah, here:

I thought, Smithy, that photography transcended language barriers, but I still haven't found a market for my work and Johan is too unbearably important to help me, says I always claimed I didn't need him. He is infinitely at home here and daily meets new faces on his project. Josh has proved my fears ill founded and fits in well at school. Already he chatters away with Johan in this impossible language. I suppose I have no choice now but to learn it too, or be left out entirely. I have to be so dependent and can't wait for these six months to pass.

I've seldom heard her so dissatisfied. She must find a way to re-establish her own worth yet recognise Johan's right to his career. Balance, Cat — you know of it instinctively. She troubled me with that letter and I thought long over my reply. Was there real discontent in their relationship? Was she looking for consolation? Advice? I sympathised but avoided interference.

It's chill, it's always chill these days. Still, Cat, be still now while I lean to turn up the heating. I fear she has lost the larger picture and dwells ever more on self and inequalities, intolerant of Johan's momentary ascendancy. I wish that I could steer her from the selfsame rocks on which my own life floundered.

Was that a whistle? Get off — I'm sorry, but surely that was the postman. It's been such a time since we had word from her.

And here it is at last. The usual stamps, her familiar hand.

First, while I'm up, I'll put the kettle on and then we'll read at leisure. No photographs. Strange when she knows how I dote on them. Move, Cat, that's my chair. Let me read this by good light. What's this she says? Josh did what? She has scrawled in haste, it seems, so difficult to decipher.

Dear Smith,

You mustn't worry for us, but Josh has been injured — has been in hospital two weeks now. His skull was fractured in a fall. They operated but my baby hasn't woken since. Smithy, I can't bear to think of what is happening here. I spend all day and most nights at his bedside. Johan comes often, but we hardly speak. He finally went too far — selfish and negligent....

Her scribble is looping larger, and so difficult to read, but now she begins a new page and her writing is regular once more.

I'm sorry, Smithy, I was ranting. I need your steady wisdom, but have only a surging anger and despair to misguide me. I'm at Josh's bedside and breathe every breath with him but, despite my prayers, there is no change. To write to you is the first clear thought I've had these last two weeks — to take distance, preserve my sanity.

Who knows what happened, why he fell? Of course boys are prone to accidents, but Johan should have kept him by his side. I will never forgive him. He has changed, Smithy. He doesn't seem to care for us as he did before. I can't love him — almost hate him. ...

And there she stops. My tea stone cold. What now? What can I do? If I were there could I help? My fingers in frustration have screwed the pages. I untwist and smooth them, scanning carefully for some gleam of hope. It's the long shadow of my past come again to grieve me. Kate, of course you don't hate him. You can't bear to contemplate the possibility of losing Josh. How could you, or Johan? Or I? Ah God, be clement this one time.

Outside the wind is easing and the rain has turned to drizzle. The eaves drip, and a sickly, sulphurous light slants over the street. I am travelling back down the years, reviewing the damage I am unable to repair. I close my eyes and feel Cat give my hand a single soft lick of consolation.

When the telephone shrills I have no notion of the time. Astoundingly it is Kate. Kate, so far away, yet immediate in my ear and my heart slamming so hard I am, at first, barely able to hear. Now her words are clear and her tidings register — Josh has regained consciousness. The doctor is satisfied that there is no serious damage. They will return as soon as he is able to travel.

And Johan? I hardly dare to ask. Her voice goes flat — she prefers not to discuss it now. She is sorry if her letter worried me. She misses someone sensible to talk to. Could they stay with me until they find a house?

The rain has cleared. The day's light in fragile crystals reflects silver from the wash of water everywhere. I pray that she chooses a way from which she'll have the least regrets — understands that we cannot reinstate what is lost, can never re-create what we have destroyed. But I am too busy now to sit in reverie. Get out from under my feet, Cat. I must tidy, make up the beds, and prepare for my dear one.

More than a week has passed and not one minute spent in idleness. I expect them any day. And even if she cannot heal the rift with Johan and comes with Josh alone, it is her decision and not mine to make. The most important thing for me is that she returns, and after that all else will be resolved.

Was that the postman, Cat? Ah, a postcard. A Dutch stamp. Let me sit.

Dear Smithy,

Isn't life wonderful? My photographs have won me an assignment at last! Josh improves every day and you'll be as proud as I am to hear that Johan has been promoted, which means our plans have changed. We'll stay here. I know you will be happy for us. I will write when I have more time. In haste and happiness and with love to you and Cat,

Kate

It gets dark so early these days. And cold. You're heavy, Cat. Your fur is damp. For that I apologise.