

The World Ending in Fire

Lyndsey's mother was no better than mine. She never left the living room. She slept there and didn't even shift when she needed to use the toilet. I saw this as laziness. I was not yet old enough to understand loss; the way it could sap the sense right out of a full-grown woman. Laziness, I called it, and something like slovenliness, though I was too young to have acquired this particular word. Still, I considered Lyndsey's mother a sloppy creature; something like a pig or cow.

I would never have said this to Lyndsey. I was careful with her. I measured my words. My own mother had taught me how to spot the cracks in people. How easy it was to destroy a person; that it was equally easy to build people up. I did not need my mother to tell me that Lyndsey was beginning to come apart.

"Your mam's like a mermaid," I said. "Your mam's a dolphin, a seal, a jellyfish." I soon ran out of plausible creatures but never once said "your mam's like a pig, ploughtering¹ round in her own muck", though this was what I thought every time I passed their window and caught a glimpse of Mrs Agnew sitting in her paddling pool. The least a person could do was leave the room to piss. Even dogs went outside. Even properly trained cats.

"She has a special chair in the corner," Lyndsey explained. "You lift up the seat and there's a bowl for going in, underneath."

We were sitting on top of the wheelie bin when this revelation came out; all three of our backsides perched round the edge so the lid was beginning to bow in the middle. We were only up there for a better stare. Even from such a vantage point we couldn't see the pissing chair. I was glad of this, like when the camera goes to the roof during the scariest bits of a horror film. There were whole sections of the room lost to us, our vision restricted by the curtains and the unforgiving angle of Mrs Agnew's venetian blinds. There were some things I didn't want to see.

"My nan's in a home," said Louise. "She pisses in her chair too." Louise was trying to make Lyndsey feel better. [...]

The Agnews were a cut above the rest of us. They'd had a second toilet built into their under-stairs cupboard. As in all our stuck-together houses, this cupboard was located just a few steps from the living room, right beside the kitchen door. The luxury of this was not wasted on me. I'd often sat in front of our TV holding the piss in my bladder till it went thin and slow, understanding that running upstairs to our own damp bathroom would cost me three full minutes of children's programmes.

Our under-stairs cupboard was just a cupboard. My ma kept the Hoover in there, hockey sticks, umbrellas and the Christmas decorations, all tangled up in an orange box. Occasionally a child – myself or, more often, one of my brothers – would find themselves temporarily incarcerated inside this cupboard for giving cheek² or refusing the last dry mouthful of boiled potatoes.

When the subject came up, my da always said that the Agnews hadn't got the good of their downstairs loo. Mr Agnew died just six weeks after it went in. Mrs Agnew's wee problem began the day after they buried him. My ma always said this wasn't a thing to be joking about, but I could see the smile nipping at the corners of her mouth. She'd flick a damp tea towel at Da's backside or touch his neck gently, like he was made of ornament china. She knew she was lucky to still have her man.

We never asked Lyndsey where her mother went at night. I presume she slept in the paddling pool. None of us had ever seen her out of the water, though once, Louise saw her standing up in it, the wetness licking round her lardy³ white shins like she was going for a paddle in her own front room. Louise told us this in the same way your woman tells the Bible Story in Sunday School. She used fancy words. Her hands went darting about all over the place. She pitched her voice at a pleading angle, like

¹ to move around

² *giving cheek*: being rude

³ fat

she was trying to convince us of something untrue.

45 When the need to nap came over Mrs Agnew she'd plump a cushion and slide it between the sofa and her grease-damped head. Then, she'd sleep for half an hour or so, mouth open and cocked⁴ towards the roof. [...] It was easy to imagine her sleeping all night in a similar position. Somebody always drew the curtains early, so Louise and I could only speculate about her overnight arrangements and what stopped her from drowning in her sleep. [...]

50 The paddling pool was a damp island, wedged between the sofa, the TV and the glass-topped coffee table where she kept her Bible and the TV remote. It was always the first thing you noticed when you were passing the house, even if you tried not to look in.

We stopped to stare at her every day. We watched her through the window, like a zoo animal, on our way home from school. Lyndsey never once said "don't". But, when I looked at her, I could see she wasn't watching herself. Her eyes were looking through her mother to the hearth and the photographs rectangling⁵ across the mantelpiece: weddings, babies, her ma and da smiling together; he punch-proud⁶ in his work uniform. You had to wonder if Mrs Agnew ever looked up; if she'd forgotten about all those people grinning down at her. None of us could remember her smiling. A smile would have looked wrong on her sunken face, like teeth in the mouth of a very young child. [...]

60 Eventually Lyndsey explained everything to us. I have to say, it made little sense. The Bible said the world was going to end in fire. It was all laid out in the Book of Revelation, which is the very last book of the Bible, and isn't really about Jesus at all. There'd be flames and smoke and volcanoes going off all over East Belfast. Lyndsey had heard this from her mother. The world was definitely going to end in fire. It was the only half-sensible thing Mrs Agnew ever said after she bought the paddling pool. She said it over and over again, like a sort of slogan. You could tell she liked the sound of it.

65 When Lyndsey's Aunt Myrtle came over from Liverpool, and asked if she wouldn't consider getting out of the pool and going back to her work in *Boots*⁷, Mrs Agnew just stared at her sister like the woman had horns. "No, thank you," she said, and continued to sit there, up to her belly button in tepid water. "The world is going to end in fire and I'm not for taking any risks."

70 She was heart-feared of getting burnt up, said Lyndsey. She wouldn't have candles around the house. She wouldn't permit a fire to be lighted. Even the idea of fire terrified her. She'd made Lyndsey take the electric fire down to the dump, though it was only made of moulded plastic, with a wee light flickering to create an effect.

75 "The water's to stop her burning up," explained Lyndsey. She needn't have said this for we'd worked it out ourselves.

I wanted to ask what would happen to the rest of us who didn't have paddling pools, and whether the lava from the volcanoes wouldn't melt the pool's plastic, and what about smoke inhalation (which I'd seen on an advert for fire alarms). But I didn't. There were only so many things Lyndsey could carry at once.

80 We never asked anything. Instead, we gathered outside Mrs Agnew's living-room window. Sometimes we stood. Sometimes we perched on the wheelie-bin lid. We watched her eat her dinner off a tray, and doze, and read the Bible, awkwardly at shoulder height, for fear of getting water on it.

85 She looked like a whale I'd once seen on the proper news. This whale had washed up on an English beach and died. It was too fat and heavy for the sea to sweep it away. I didn't feel sorry for Lyndsey's mother. [...]

I saved all my sympathy for Lyndsey who was only eight at the time, then nine and finally ten, far too young to take on so much responsibility. She didn't have a decent parent left and both her brothers were feckless eejits, or so said my da once – all mumbly-like, to mammy – when he thought I

⁴ tilted

⁵ (here) arranged

⁶ very proud

⁷ British chain store

90 was concentrating on the TV. Boom, went Lyndsey's dad, burnt to a crisp with two other RUC⁸ officers in a bomb some bad men stuck under their car. Then, two days after the funeral, her mother's down in *Woolworths*⁹, buying a paddling pool and blowing it up and sitting in it for three whole years. It was hard not to see the two things related. The end of the world was only an excuse.

I wanted to tell Lyndsey that none of this was her fault. I imagined myself waiting until the two of us were alone. I'd put an arm around her shoulders, or maybe I'd keep my hands to myself. I'd say,
95 "Listen, Lyndsey, I hope you know it's not your fault that your da got blown up and your mum's gone mental. It's pretty shit that all this happened. But you are definitely not to blame."

But I was eight at the time, then nine and finally ten, too young to find the proper words. All I could do was let Lyndsey have half my *Mars Bar* [...]. By the time I was old enough to be of any real use, Lyndsey had moved to Glasgow. The paddling pool was long gone and it was not the sort of thing you
100 could bring up casually on the rare occasions when she came home. "Here, Lynds, remember when your mum spent three years squatting in a kiddies' pool and you basically had to fend for yourself? That was a bit mad, so it was. I'm just down the road if you want to talk about it." I didn't know how to bring the paddling pool up. By then we were not even close.

When we were about nine, I asked my ma what was going to happen to Mrs Agnew. Drink bottles
105 had appeared in her living room. They'd circled their way round the pool's edge like glassy soldiers standing guard. My mother laid her hand heavily upon my head, as if she was measuring how tall I was. She said, "You be nice to Lyndsey now." This was the answer to a question I had not thought to ask. [...]

Later, when she was dead, we all lined up to look at Mrs Agnew. I could see that her skin was flat
110 again, like a used paper bag smoothed out with a finger. Her mouth was drawn up at the corners, somewhere between asleep and a smile. You wouldn't have known from looking at her that she'd been underwater all that time. My da said the undertaker had done a stellar job. You wouldn't have known there was anything wrong with her at all. If you looked closer though, you could see the paddling pool had left a mark on the living room carpet: a big damp circle spreading out all round the coffin. It was darker than the rest of the floor, and perfectly circular, and cold to the touch. It looked as if Lyndsey's
115 mother had leaked, like she'd left an ugly stain behind.

(2019)

⁸ *Royal Ulster Constabulary*: the police force in Northern Ireland

⁹ supermarket