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MEG MASON

SORROW AND BLISS

MEG MASON

FOURTH ESTATE

Dedication

To my parents, and my husband

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AT A WEDDING shortly after our own, I followed Patrick through the dense crowd at the reception to a woman who was standing by herself.

He said that instead of looking at her every five minutes and feeling sad I should just go over and compliment her hat.

‘Even if I don’t like it?’

He said obviously, Martha. ‘You don’t like anything. Come on.’

The woman had accepted a canapé from a waiter and was putting it in her mouth when she noticed us, realising in the same instant that it could not be managed in one bite. As we approached, she lowered her chin and tried to shield her effort to get it all the way in, then all the way out, with the empty glass and supply of cocktail napkins in her other hand. Although Patrick drew out his introduction, she responded with something neither of us could make out. Because she looked so embarrassed, I began speaking as though somebody had given me one minute on the topic of ladies’ hats.

The woman gave a series of little nods and then as soon as she could, asked us where we lived and what we did with ourselves and, if she was correct in thinking we were married, how long had we been and how was it we’d come to know each other in the first place, the quantity and velocity of her questions meant to divert attention from the half-eaten thing now sitting on an oily napkin in her upturned palm. While I was answering, she looked furtively past me for somewhere to put it; when I had finished, she said she might have missed my meaning, in saying Patrick and I had never actually met, he was ‘always just there’.

I turned to consider my husband, at that moment trying to fish an invisible object out of his glass with one finger, then looked back at the woman and said Patrick’s sort of like the sofa that was in your house growing up. ‘Its existence was just a fact. You never wondered where it came from because you can’t remember it not being there. Even now, if it’s still there, nobody gives it any conscious thought.’

‘Although I suppose,’ I went on because the woman didn’t move to say anything, ‘if pressed, you would be able to list every single one of its imperfections. And the causes thereof.’

Patrick said it was unfortunately true. ‘Martha could definitely give you an inventory of my flaws.’

The woman laughed, then glanced briefly at the handbag hanging from her forearm by its little strap, as if weighing its merits as a receptacle.

‘Right, who needs a top-up?’ Patrick pointed both index fingers at me and pumped invisible triggers with his thumbs. ‘Martha, I know you won’t say no.’ He gestured at the woman’s glass and she let him take it. Then he said, ‘Would you like me to take that too?’ She smiled and looked like she was about to cry as he relieved her of the canapé.

Once he had gone she said, ‘You must feel so lucky, being married to a man like that.’ I said yes and thought about explaining the drawbacks of being married to somebody who everybody thinks is nice, but instead I asked her where she got her amazing hat and waited for Patrick to come back.

The sofa became our stock answer to the question of how we met after that. We did it for eight years, with few variations. People always laughed.

*

There is a GIF called ‘Prince William asking Kate if she wants another drink’. My sister texted it to me once. She said ‘I am crying!!!!’ They are at some kind of reception. William is wearing a tuxedo. He waves at Kate across the room, mimes the upending of a glass, then points at her with one finger.

‘The pointing thing,’ my sister said. ‘Literally Patrick tho.’

I wrote back, ‘Figuratively Patrick tho.’

She sent me the eye-roll emoji, the champagne flute and the pointing finger.

The day I moved back in with my parents, I found it again. I have watched it 5000 times.

*

My sister’s name is Ingrid. She is fifteen months younger than me and married to a man she met by falling over in front of his house while he was putting his bins out. She is pregnant with her fourth child; when she texted to say it was another boy, she sent the eggplant emoji, the cherries and the

open scissors. She said ‘Hamish is non-figuratively getting the snip.’

Growing up, people thought we were twins. We were desperate to dress alike, but our mother said no. Ingrid said, ‘Why can’t we?’

‘Because people will think it’s my idea –’ she looked around the room we were in at the time. ‘None of this was my idea.’

Later, when we were both in the grip of puberty, our mother said that since Ingrid was evidently getting all the bust, we could only hope I’d end up with the brains. We asked her which was better. She said it was better to have both or neither; one without the other was invariably lethal.

My sister and I still look alike. Our jaws are similarly too square but according to our mother we somehow get away with it. Our hair has the same tendency towards stragglyness, has generally always been long, and was the same blondish colour until I turned thirty-nine and realised in the morning that I could not stop forty from coming. In the afternoon, I got it cut to too-square jaw-length, then went home and bleached it with supermarket dye. Ingrid came over while I was doing it and used the rest. Both of us struggled with its upkeep. Ingrid said it would have been less work just to have another baby.

I have known since I was young that, although we are so similar, people think Ingrid is more beautiful than I am. I told my father once. He said, ‘They might look at her first. But they’ll want to look at you for longer.’

*

In the car on the way home from the last party Patrick and I went to, I said, ‘When you do that pointing thing it makes me want to shoot you with an actual gun.’ My voice was dry and mean and I hated it – and Patrick when he said, ‘Great, thanks’ with no emotion at all.

‘I don’t mean in the face. More like a warning shot in the knee or somewhere that you could still go to work.’

He said good to know and put our address into Google Maps.

We had lived in the same house in Oxford for seven years. I pointed that out. He didn’t say anything and I looked across at him in the driver’s seat, waiting calmly for a break in the traffic. ‘Now you’re doing the jaw thing.’

‘I know what, Martha. How about we don’t talk until we get home.’ He took his phone out of the bracket and closed it silently into the glovebox.

I said something else, then leaned forward and put the heater on to its highest setting. As soon as the car became stifling, I turned it off and lowered my window all the way. It was crusted with ice and made a scraping noise as it went down.

It used to be a joke between us, that in everything I swing between extremes and he lives his entire life on the middle setting. Before I got out, I said, ‘That orange light is still on.’ Patrick told me he was planning to get oil the next day, turned off the car and went into the house without waiting for me.

*

We took the house on a temporary lease, in case things didn’t work out and I wanted to go back to London. Patrick had suggested Oxford because it is where he went to university and he thought that, compared to other places, commuter towns in the home counties, I might find it easier to make friends. We extended the lease by six months, fourteen times, as though things could not work out at any moment.

The letting agent told us it was an Executive Home, in an Executive Development, and therefore perfect for us – even though neither of us are executives. One of us is a consultant specialist in intensive care. One of us writes a funny food column for Waitrose magazine and went through a period of Googling ‘Priory clinic how much per night?’ when her husband was at work.

The Executive nature of it manifested, in physical terms, as expanses of taupe carpet and a multitude of non-standard sockets and, in personal terms, a permanent sense of unease whenever I was there alone. A box room on the top floor was the only room that did not make me feel like there was someone behind me because it was small and there was a plane tree out the window. In summer it obscured the view of identical Executive Homes on the other side of the cul-de-sac. In autumn, dead leaves blew inside and mitigated the carpet. The box room was where I worked even though, as I was often reminded by strangers in social settings, writing is something I can do anywhere.

The editor of my funny food column would send me notes saying ‘not getting this ref’ and ‘rephrase if poss’. He used Tracked Changes. I pressed Accept, Accept, Accept. After he had taken out all the jokes, it was just a food column. According to LinkedIn, my editor was born in 1995.

*

The party we were coming home from was for my fortieth birthday. Patrick planned it because I had told him that I wasn't in the right place, re celebrating.

He said, 'We have to attack the day.'

'Do we.'

We listened to a podcast on the train once, sharing the same headphones. Patrick had folded his jumper into a pillow so I could put my head on his shoulder. It was the Archbishop of Canterbury on Desert Island Discs. He told a story about losing his first child in car crash a long time ago.

The presenter asked him how he coped with it now. He said that when it comes to the anniversary, Christmas, her birthday, he had learned that you have to attack the day, 'so it doesn't attack you.'

Patrick seized on the principle. He started saying it all the time. He said it while he was ironing his shirt before the party. I was on our bed watching Bake Off on my laptop, an old episode I had seen before. A contestant takes someone else's Baked Alaska out of the fridge and it melts in the tin. It made the front page of the papers: a saboteur in the Bake Off tent.

Ingrid texted me when it first aired. She said she would go to her grave knowing that Baked Alaska had been taken out on purpose. I said I was on the fence. She sent me all the cake emojis and the police car.

When he had finished ironing, Patrick came and sat seminext to me on the bed and watched me watching. 'We have to –'

I hit the space bar. 'Patrick, I don't really think we should co-opt Bishop Whoever in this case. It's only my birthday. Nobody has died.'

'I was just trying to be positive.'

'Okay.' I hit the space bar again.

After a moment he told me it was nearly quarter to. 'Should you start getting ready? I'd like to be the first ones there. Martha?'

I closed the computer. 'Can I wear what I'm wearing?' Leggings, a Fair Isle cardigan, I can't remember what underneath. I looked up and saw that I had hurt him. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll get changed.'

Patrick had hired the upstairs part of a bar we used to go to. I did not want to be the first ones there, unsure if I should sit or stand while I waited for people to arrive, wondering if anybody was going to, then feeling

awkward on behalf of the person who had the misfortune of being first. I knew that my mother would not be there because I told Patrick not to invite her.

Forty-four people came in units of two. After the age of thirty, it is always even numbers. It was November and freezing. Everyone took a long time to give up their coats. They were mostly Patrick's friends. I had lost touch with my own, from school and university and all the jobs I have had since, one by one as they had children and I didn't and there was nothing left for us to talk about. On the way to the party, Patrick said if anyone did start telling me a story about their children, maybe I could try and look interested.

They stood around and drank Negronis – 2017 was 'the year of the Negroni' – and laughed very loudly and made impromptu speeches, one speaker stepping forward from each group like representatives of a team. I found an ambulant toilet and cried in it.

Ingrid told me fragapane phobia is the fear of birthdays. It was the fun fact from the peel-off strip from sanitary pads, which she says are her chief source of intellectual stimulation at this point, the only reading she gets time for. She said, in her speech, 'We all know Martha is an amazing listener, especially if she's the one talking.' Patrick had something written on palm cards.

There wasn't a single moment when I became the wife I am, although if I had to choose one, my crossing the room and asking my husband not to read out whatever was on those cards would be a contender.

An observer to my marriage would think I have made no effort to be a good or better wife. Or, seeing me that night, that I must have set out to be this way and achieved it after years of concentrated effort. They could not tell that for most of my adult life and all of my marriage I have been trying to become the opposite of myself.

*

The next morning I told Patrick I was sorry for all of it. He had made coffee and carried it out to the living room but hadn't touched it when I came into the room. He was sitting at one end of the sofa. I sat down and folded my legs underneath me. Facing him, the posture felt beseeching and I put one foot back on the floor.

'I don't mean to be like this.' I made myself put my hand on his. It was

the first time I had touched him on purpose for five months. ‘Patrick, honestly, I can’t help it.’

‘And yet somehow you manage to be so nice to your sister.’ He shook my hand off and said he was going out to buy a newspaper. He didn’t come back for five hours.

I am still forty. It is the end of winter, 2018, no longer the year of the Negroni. Patrick left two days after the party.

2

MY FATHER IS a poet called Fergus Russell. His first poem was published in The New Yorker when he was nineteen. It was about a bird, the dying variety. After it came out, someone called him a male Sylvia Plath. He got a notable advance on his first anthology. My mother, who was his girlfriend then, is purported to have said, ‘Do we need a male Sylvia Plath?’ She denies it but it is in the family script. No one gets to revise it after it is written. It was also the last poem my father ever published. He says she hexed him. She denies that too. The anthology remains forthcoming. I don’t know what happened to the money.

My mother is the sculptor Celia Barry. She makes birds, the menacing, oversized variety, out of repurposed materials. Rake heads, appliance motors, things from the house. Once, at one of her shows, Patrick said, ‘I honestly think your mother has never met extant physical matter she couldn’t repurpose.’ He was not being unkind. Very little in my parents’ home functions according to its original remit.

Growing up, whenever my sister and I overheard her say to someone ‘I am a sculptor’, Ingrid would mouth the line from that Elton John song. I would start laughing and she would keep going with her eyes closed and her fists pressed against her chest until I had to leave the room. It has never stopped being funny.

According to The Times my mother is minorly important. Patrick and I were at the house helping my father rearrange his study the day the notice appeared. She read it aloud to the three of us, laughing unhappily at the minorly bit. Afterwards, my father said he’d take any degree of importance at this stage. ‘And they’ve given you a definite article. The sculptor Celia Barry. Spare a thought for we the indefinites.’ Later, he cut it out and taped it to the fridge. My father’s role in their marriage is relentless self-abnegation.

*

Sometimes Ingrid gets one of her children to ring and talk to me on the phone because, she says, she wants them to have a very close relationship with me, and also it gets them off her balls for literally five seconds. Once, her eldest son called and told me there was a fat lady at the post office and his favourite cheese is the one that comes in the bag and is sort of whitish. Ingrid texted me later and said, ‘He means cheddar.’

I do not know when he will stop calling me Marfa. I hope, never.

*

Our parents still live in the house we grew up in, on Goldhawk Road in Shepherd’s Bush. They bought it the year I turned ten with a deposit lent to them by my mother’s sister Winsome who married money instead of a male Sylvia Plath. As children, they lived in a flat above a key-cutting shop in, my mother tells people, ‘a depressed seaside town, with a depressed seaside mother’. Winsome is older by seven years. When their mother died suddenly of an indeterminate kind of cancer and their father lost interest in things, in particular them, Winsome withdrew from the Royal College of Music to come back and look after my mother, who was thirteen then. She has never had a career. My mother is minorly important.

*

It was Winsome who found the Goldhawk Road house and arranged for my parents to pay much less for it than it was worth, because it was a deceased estate and, my mother said, based on the whiff, the body was still somewhere under the carpet.

On the day we moved in, Winsome came over to help clean the kitchen. I went in to get something and saw my mother sitting at the table drinking a glass of wine and my aunt, in a tabard and rubber gloves, standing on the top rung of a stepladder wiping out the cupboards.

They stopped talking, then started again when I left the room. I stood outside the door and heard Winsome telling my mother that perhaps she ought to try and muster up a suggestion of gratitude since home ownership was generally beyond the reach of a sculptor and a poet who doesn’t produce any poetry. My mother did not speak to her for eight months.

Then, and now, she hates the house because it is narrow and dark;

because the only bathroom opens off the kitchen via a slatted door, which requires Radio Four to be on at high volume whenever anyone is in there. She hates it because there is only one room on each floor and the staircase is very steep. She says she spends her life on those stairs and that one day she'll die on them.

She hates it because Winsome lives in a townhouse in Belgravia. Enormous, on a Georgian square and, my aunt tells people, the better side of it because it keeps the light into the afternoon and has a nicer aspect onto the private garden. The house was a wedding present from my uncle Rowland's parents, renovated for a year prior to their moving in and regularly ever since, at a cost my mother claims to find immoral.

Although Rowland is intensely frugal, it is only as a hobbyist – he has never needed to work – and only in the minutiae. He bonds the remaining sliver of soap to the new bar but Winsome is allowed to spend a quarter of a million pounds on Carrara marble in a single renovation and buy pieces of furniture that are described, in auction catalogues, as 'significant'.

*

In choosing a house for us solely on the basis of its bones – my mother said, not the ones we were guaranteed to find if we lifted the carpet – Winsome's expectation was that we would improve it over time. But my mother's interest in interiors never extended beyond complaining about them as they were. We had come from a rented flat in a suburb much further out and did not have enough furniture for rooms above the first floor. She made no effort to acquire any and they remained empty for a long time until my father borrowed a van and returned with flat-pack bookshelves, a small sofa with brown corduroy covers and a birch table that he knew my mother would not like but, he said, they were only a stopgap until he got the anthology out and the royalties started crashing in. Most of it is still in the house, including the table, which she calls our only genuine antique. It has been moved from room to room, serving various functions, and is presently my father's desk. 'But no doubt,' my mother says, 'when I'm on my deathbed, I'll open my eyes for the last time and realise it is my deathbed.'

Afterwards, my father set out to paint the downstairs, at Winsome's encouragement, in a shade of terracotta called Umbrian Sunrise. Because he did not discriminate with his brush between wall, skirting board,

window frame, light switch, power outlet, door, hinge or handle, progress was initially swift. But my mother was beginning to describe herself as a conscientious objector where domestic matters were concerned. Eventually the work of cleaning and cooking and washing became solely his and he never finished. Even now, the hallway at Goldhawk Road is a tunnel of terracotta to midway. The kitchen is terracotta on three sides. Parts of the living room are terracotta to waist height.

Ingrid cared about the state of things more than I did when we were young. But neither of us cared much that things which broke were never repaired, that the towels were always damp and rarely changed, that every night my father cooked chops under the grill on a sheet of tinfoil laid over the piece from the night before, so that the bottom of the oven gradually became a millefeuille of fat and foil. If she ever cooked, my mother made exotic things without recipes, tagines and ratatouilles distinguishable from each other only by the shape of the capsicum pieces, which floated in liquid tasting so bitterly of tomato that in order to swallow a mouthful I had to close my eyes and rub my feet together under the table.

*

Patrick and I were a part of each other's childhoods; there was no need for us, newly coupled, to share the particulars of our early lives. It became an ongoing competition instead. Whose was worse?

I told him, once, that I was always the last one picked up from birthday parties. So late, the mother would say, I wonder if I should give your parents a ring. Replacing the receiver after a period of minutes, she would say not to worry, we can try again later. I became part of the tidying up, then the family supper, leftover cake. It was, I told Patrick, excruciating. At my own parties, my mother drank.

He stretched, pretending to limber up. 'Every single birthday party I had between the ages of seven and eighteen was at school. Thrown by Master. The cake came from the drama department prop cupboard. It was plaster of Paris.' He said, good game though.

*

Mostly, Ingrid rings me when she is driving somewhere with the children

because, she says, she can only talk properly when everyone is restrained and, in a perfect world, asleep; the car is basically a giant pram at this point. A while ago, she called to tell me she had just met a woman at the park who said she and her husband had separated and now had half-half custody of their children. The handover took place on Sunday mornings, the woman told her, so they both had one weekend day each on their own. She had started going to the cinema by herself on Saturday nights and had recently discovered that her ex-husband goes by himself on Sunday nights. Often it turns out they have chosen to see the same film. Ingrid said the last time it was X-Men: First Class. ‘Martha, literally have you ever heard anything more depressing? It’s like, just go the fuck together. You will both be dead soon.’

Throughout childhood our parents would separate on a roughly biannual basis. It was always anticipated by a shift in atmosphere that would occur usually overnight and even if Ingrid and I never knew why it had happened, we knew instinctively that it was not wise to speak above a whisper or ask for anything or tread on the floorboards that made a noise, until our father had put his clothes and typewriter into a laundry basket and moved into the Hotel Olympia, a bed and breakfast at the end of our road.

My mother would start spending all day and all night in her repurposing shed at the end of the garden, while Ingrid and I stayed in the house by ourselves. The first night, Ingrid would drag her bedding into my room and we would lie top and tail, kept awake by the sound of metal tools being dropped on the concrete floor and the whining, discordant folk music our mother worked to, carrying in through our open window.

During the day she would sleep on the brown sofa that Ingrid and I had been asked to carry out for that purpose. And despite a permanent sign on the door that said ‘GIRLS: before knocking, ask self – is something on fire?’, before school I would go in and collect dirty plates and mugs and, more and more, empty bottles so that Ingrid wouldn’t see them. For a long time, I thought it was because I was so quiet that my mother did not wake up.

I do not remember if we were scared, if we thought this time it was real, our father was not coming back, and we would naturally acquire phrases like ‘my mum’s boyfriend’ and ‘I left it at my dad’s,’ using them as easily as classmates who claimed to love having two Christmases. Neither of us confessed to being worried. We just waited. As we got older, we began to refer to them as The Leavings.

Eventually, our mother would send one of us down to the hotel to get him because, she said, this whole thing was bloody ridiculous even though, invariably, it would have been her idea. Once my father got back, she would kiss him up against the sink, my sister and I watching, mortified, as her hand found its way up the back of his shirt. Afterwards it wouldn't be referred to except jokingly. And then there would be a party.

*

All of Patrick's jumpers have holes in the elbows, even ones that aren't very old. One side of his collar is always inside the neck, the other side over it and, despite constant retucking, an edge of shirt always finds its way out at the back. Three days after he has a haircut, he needs a haircut. He has the most beautiful hands I have ever seen.

*

Apart from her recurrent throwing-out of our father, parties were our mother's chief contribution to our domestic life, the thing that made us so willing to forgive her inadequacies compared to what we knew of other people's mothers. They overflowed the house, bled from Friday nights into Sunday mornings, and were populated by what our mother described as West London's artistic elite, though the only credential for getting in seemed to be a vague association with the arts, a tolerance for marijuana smoke and/or possession of a musical instrument.

Even when it was winter, with all the windows open, the house would be hot and heaving and full of sweet smoke. Ingrid and I were not excluded or made to go to bed. All night, we made our way in and out of rooms, pushing through throngs of people – men who wore tall boots or boiler suits and women's jewellery, and women who wore petticoats as dresses over dirty jeans, Doc Marten boots. We were not trying to get anywhere, only as close to them as possible.

If they told us to come over and talk to them, we tried to sparkle in conversation. Some treated us like adults, others laughed at us when we were not meaning to be funny. When they needed an ashtray, another drink, when they wanted to know where the pans were because they had decided to fry eggs at three a.m., Ingrid and I fought each other for the job.

Eventually my sister and I would fall asleep, never in our beds but always together, and wake up to the mess and the murals spontaneously painted on bits of wall that had not been Umbrian Sunrised. The last one ever conceived is still there, on a wall in the bathroom, faded but not enough so that you can avoid studying the foreshortened left arm of the central nude from the shower. When we first saw it, Ingrid and I feared it was our mother, painted from life.

Our mother who, on those nights, drank wine out of the bottle, plucked cigarettes from people's mouths, blew smoke at the ceiling, laughed with her head tipped back and danced by herself. Her hair was still long then, still a natural colour, and she was not fat yet. She wore slips and scraggy fox furs, black stockings, no shoes. There was, briefly, a silk turban.

Generally speaking, my father would be in the corner of the room talking to one person; occasionally, holding a glass of something and reciting The Rime of the Ancient Mariner in regional accents to a small but appreciative crowd. Either way, he would give up and join my mother as soon as she started dancing because she kept calling him until he did.

He would try to follow her lead and catch her when she had spun herself beyond standing up. And he was so much taller than her – that is what I remember, he looked so tall.

I had no way to describe the way my mother looked, how she seemed to me then, except to wonder if she was famous. Everyone drew back to watch her dance, despite the fact that it was only spinning, wrapping her arms around her own body, or waving them above her head like she was trying to imitate the movement of seaweed.

Worn out, she would sag into my father's arms but seeing us at the edge of the circle, say, 'Girls! Girls come here!', excited again. Ingrid and I would refuse but only once because when we were dancing with them, we felt adored by our tall father and funny, falling-over mother and adored, as the four of us, by the people who were watching, even if we didn't know who they were.

Looking back, it is unlikely our mother knew them either – the object of her parties seemed to be filling the house with extraordinary strangers and being extraordinary in front of them, and not a person who used to live above a key-cutter. It was not enough to be extraordinary to the three of us.

*