

## **A good night's sleep**

The car purred up the drive like an excited kitten. Debra stopped it close to the front door. There was ample room on the drive for more than one vehicle but one would be enough for the moment. There were some advantages of having been married to an imprisoned banker. In theory the property belonged to a company with a strange name, registered in an even rarer off-shore island, but apparently she was a director and could use it. Something to do with the separation. If he hadn't divorced her it might have been different. They could have taken everything and left her to catch a bus and visit him once a week in that brown building they called a reform centre.

Fortunately, that would not be the case. She had made sure she would be well taken care of and was looking forward to their new house. You had to start somewhere.

"Why do we have to change?"

Debra opened the car door. The Mercedes obeyed sleekly, pitifully compliant. She wondered if they had packed enough for the first days. The movers would take a week at very best. A bit distant they had confided. Not sure who we can deal with out there.

"I don't want a new house."

"Yes dear. Of course not."

"Can I phone my friends now?"

"No honey. Wait until I get a new phone deal. We are way out in the country you know."

That wasn't quite true, a secluded estate bordering a major city was hardly the countryside but a ten year old didn't have to know that. Anything to keep her

quiet and them both well protected behind a veil of secrecy, a wire mesh keeping the chickens from returning home to roost.

"How's little bear doing? Hasn't been sick has he?" She fumbled to change the subject knowing her daughter was not easily led off course, displaying as she tended to do, that dried assurance of her dad's necessity to win.

"But I want to talk to Sarah. She has the homework."

"Zoey dear, you have all summer for the homework."

Cheek squeezed into the glass, her dark blue eyes fluttered through passing streets, then tree lit lanes as buses faded into scarcity and houses hid behind clipped hedges, shrines to the privacy wealth could varnish. She sulked in silence, breath fogging up the pane, little bear clearing it as regular as the expensive wiper on their brand new car. She didn't like it. It smelt funny, like a new sofa you weren't allowed sit on or another expensive frilly dress she would never want to wear. She cuddled little bear closer. Her other hand scratched her knee. A fresh scab appeared. Her leg was covered with anxious little blood spots.

Her daughter had been silent all journey, pale heart shaped stare lost in the rims of her little bear. Little bear comforted, held her close, soothed and had rarely been out of her arms since her father left. Two years ago now. By the time of his release she would be finishing her doctorate or shackled up with some hippie, or both.

"Mama why is it all so dirty?"

Debra hadn't thought of that. There must be a cleaner in the village. Only a couple of kilometers away. The problem with financial havens: they had to be well hidden, difficult to get at when you needed basic services. No more metro. No more wine bin. Life in the sticks, where the tax squad finds it harder to trace you, the hatchet man seeking little red riding hood through a forest of lies, illicit encounters, dodgy accounts trapped in a haze unable to separate wood, the trees or the moss underfoot.

"We're not inside yet. It'll be lovely and clean."

"Look at all those leaves and the stones. They are all green. It's dirty."

Honey wiggled her nose, freckles twitched: Zoey knew better than to believe her mommy's feeble promises. "It's dirty mum!"

Daughter was picking a fight. It might be the first of many. Zoey had always known how to scream. Debra usually had somebody to intervene up to now, a babysitter to clean that nappy, wipe that smile back into place. Now it seemed to be just the two of them. For a moment the sweet, angelic face that reminded her of herself, was a pouting threat to her forced retirement from social life, the lord of the manner's lover married off finally to the village vicar. By the looks of it there wouldn't be a man in sight to get off with. Just her and daughter. That was a challenge she hadn't prepared herself for.

"Let's just go inside dear and look around, shall we? Come on honey."

Silence was a better reply than she had expected.

"Help me, would you, with some of the bags."

Stubbornly, one arm gripping little bear, Zoey grabbed a plastic bag which mainly held her own toys, kindle and ipad. Her mother had to deal with the rest. That was her job. Mothers existed for a reason.

"Hey honey. It's an adventure, a big adventure! Better than all those cameras and journalists out front."

Why did she keep calling her honey. Her mother knew she hated it: she must have reminded her at least more than once.

"We could even get a dog. Lots of room out here."

Zoey's face brightened. She rewarded her mother a cozy, loving little smile. Just one. She would have to save them up. It was going to be a long, dry summer and she would have to hoard up her cuteness if she wanted that pup. She knew

her mother. It was so much easier get around her father: he hadn't had time for sulks.

The house looked impressive but Debra could have done with a little extra, a few more hands to help her with all these chores she hadn't been doing for so many years. You should be ok her lawyers told her, all stuffed into shiny suits with over expensive ties in her opinion, for the work they did. Don't be extravagant. The divorce should have settled everything. He did it in time. They shouldn't be able to touch what you have but please; lawyers had a funny way of saying please, always with a sigh as if you really should know better and that explaining it to you was like teaching an adult how to swim. She just wished they wouldn't be so smug, please. Ok, she had said. Low key. Keep the money but away from the cameras, the spotlight as they liked to call it. Discretion wasn't however the best part of valor, rather the stigma of having got it once wrong. She could forgive him a lot, the other women, fiddling books, even being caught, but she still struggled with the ignominy. She would have managed just fine as a divorcee, glamorous even, but an ex-wife under what was effectively house arrest wasn't in line with her initial expectations.

"Yes dear."

Dear had said nothing but she repeated just in case. "Yes dear."

They both sighed silently.

"I've got the keys. Big deal eh? Let's go honey."

Dear clutched little bear even closer. Daughter's lips pouted angrily, forgetting their promise to pine for a dog.

The door rumbled as they crossed the step. A bag slipped, slit open and strolled into the hall before them. Well, at least she had remembered the pizza Debra noticed as its contents peeled away, in silent laughter. Zoey stepped on it as she moved forward impulsively, pretty neat summer dress, all pink and fluffy,

like her little princess friends, catching on the umbrella rack inside the hall. She really wished her mother would let her wear her own clothes. She was ten. She didn't do pink any more. Or dresses. She clung to her little bear as the hall breathed a hint of gloom. It smelled old, closed, like stale bread you need to throw away. She didn't really do adventures either she realized.

Debra was wondering when it would sink in that they hadn't Wi-Fi yet. No Skype, no sms: daughter would give her hell. And damn it: she had forgotten to check if they had a microwave or not. Fully furnished could mean anything to anyone. Raw pizza would not cheer up daughter.

Once windows were open, blinds drawn and the damp summer light and feeble heat that defied global warming entered, the house began to look more cheerful and homely, much as it had appeared on the web.

"It's very big. It's very big..." Zoey kept repeating, a mantra to fill the empty spaces that were growing all around.

It took over a week for the furniture to arrive and slowly things began to fit into place, forcing homely warmth on a great empty space. The microwave did work. It pinged nicely, usually on time.

Zoey thought her bedroom enormous and clung to little bear whenever she was alone there, which was quite a lot of time considering what a bedroom is for. The bed was so wide: she was afraid of losing him. Little bear. Little bear.

He needs a wash you know. Her mother let the threat fade. She could chose a nice dress and the correct canapés but she was no longer confident enough with a washing machine to risk thrusting a little bear inside. It was a skill she had learned to leave behind before it had trapped her into unknown miseries.

Days started to merge with the clatter of a metal shutter lacking a good oiling, but then they expanded into a more peaceful hue as patterns evolved and

folded a gentle curtain around their solitude. Zoey still insisted on Wi-Fi. Her mother promised it took time where they now lived. She could survive for a bit longer she reasoned, until it had all blown away, wandered off track but for the moment she didn't want her daughter googling her father and running the risk of finding out too much or being found out herself. Life without internet: an eerie silence.

They were learning to play. Little bear led the way. Even so, Zoey seemed to spend hours on her own. She wandered the garden. Threw pebbles until an apple hit her on the head. Tried to break a window. But she was only ten. And ten wasn't power enough she was learning. Not to break a glass pane or to run down the road and back to their flat and the busses and the lights and the comforting honking of stalled traffic all struggling to get to a home just like hers. She'd liked living in the centre of it all. And there had always been someone to take care of her, feed her goodies, clean little teddy, leave the bulb alight in the passage while she waited for her parents to come home from another reception. Fingers scraped off another dribble of dried skin from her shin. All she had now was the snoring.

They left the light on at night but the corridor was so long and the stairs so steep that the remaining glimmer was only faintly comforting, a silver halo of dispersed hope in the depth of the night. Little bear didn't really like it but it was better than nothing, a sliver of the moon hiding around corners. Zoey made sure to fall asleep with her head towards the open door. Behind her, outside the window, huddling, groaning in a conspiratorial darkness, trees branched off into the strangest of sighs, snoring under the weight of their forbidden fruit. She'd try again tomorrow, knock another apple down, even though her mother warned her they would fall themselves when ripe. Whatever ripe meant. When they were all black and horrible and mushy and would stain little bear if they caught him? Running away didn't work either. Her mother hadn't missed her. She had been right down the end of the garden, almost into the field, for what must have been twenty minutes. Mother didn't notice she

was running away. Dried blood clots fell from her legs as she ran back having lost the fight with the nettles. She could still smell their bitter tang even after her shower. The snoring drove her to sleep.

She wished they had that dog. That would be fun. She'd text her friends right now and get their suggestions. She might be able to convince her mother if they all chipped in and agreed on a breed. Little bear would like that. She'd just have to remember and be careful that her mother didn't realize she had copied the Wi-Fi password she had left idly about in her purse. Her mother really should shower much more quickly: her dallying with water led to all sorts of temptations. Little bear would know. He loved the scent of her perfumes and the whiff of her handbag down the back of the sofa.

Zoey found the door at the end of the corridor. Just like all the others, fading white with a shiny, fake golden door knob. It must have always been there but she didn't remember seeing it before. She slid it open. Mother was downstairs: on the internet Zoey presumed. She had little bear in her arms; there was nothing better to do. The door opened before her, slipped ajar, well oiled hinges teasing without a squeak of annoyance or protest. Little bear went first. Just in case. He was brave. The blind was down, curtains drawn. And there was the snoring, a heavy wheeze of air gushing around cavities, hustled out in gasps, smothering under burgundy sheets but still leaving a trace, an exotic whiff of mothballs and a tweak to the ear. The room smelled, a bit like the garage downstairs, old and homeless, in need of an efficient stir, the flick of a cleaning wrist and a defiant mop. Zoey held her nose. Little bear snuggled in to her chest. He wasn't too sure what to do next. The man in the bed turned slightly, but remained in a deep sleep. The enormous blue and red checked blankets heaved with the effort, rising and falling with the hiss of each sneezy breath. She closed the door and let him rest.

It was the third day before he opened an eye. By then she had grown accustomed to the breathing, found it relaxing almost, comforting in that

strange world of make believe where you imagined a prince slashing through thorns to wake you with a polished colgate smile and deep blue eyes that knew how to love you, forever.

He was no handsome prince. She could see that immediately: despite their own bulk, the bed covers clearly hid a sturdy frame beneath. Her father was all tiny frail bone and neat, breath barely whistling, although he did grind his teeth. She remembered that. Not the most soothing of sounds but when it it's your dad the familiarity breathes contemplation. Where was he sleeping now? No point asking her mother. She had too many instructions to give, too many chores for them both to do, to keep busy, out of harm's way as if anything could threaten them in this dreadful forgotten outpost of a dungeon. Little bear. Little bear. She didn't mention her father. It was easier not to miss him. She knew mother would agree.

She was squatting there on the floor, little bear to hand, soaking up the faint snoring when she noticed he was watching her. Silently, without interrupting the flow of his heavy breathing, the pupil blinked gently, kept her in vision, invading her privacy as he caught her gaze and burrowed her brows. He closed one eye, then the other and retreated back to a deep sleep. It took a day for him to turn over again and attempt to take her in. He stared at her for quite a few minutes and then just seemed to shrug, sigh, let his eyebrows fall, lashes close in and heave his body over, drift off again, leaving his back wide open to soak up her stares as he ignored her completely. It was funny how her own bedroom frightened her and his didn't. She realized she'd forgotten little bear for a minute and ran off to find him. She'd left him beside the heap of pebbles in the orchard. She flung them at the apples. Her mother didn't really care. She hadn't even noticed daughter had stopped wearing her dresses and that she hadn't changed her leggings in four days.

His silence was infectious. Nevertheless, even through the snoring Zoey could sense he was beginning to wake up. The rhythm had become slightly uneven, more air expelled than normal, a nasal bite to the tone. His heaving was becoming more restless, stirring uneasily, his eyes spying her as they tried to



close the intruder out, a fire blanket over a stumbling flame. Her mother began joining her. They squatted on the floor together, blocking the entrance as if they thought he might escape. It was soothing. Nice. Mother had actually missed her and left her iPad below just to sit beside daughter and little bear, soaking up the dreams of a the man who just wouldn't fully wake up.

Then he did. It was a Thursday, late morning, the trees were rustling outside with a hint of autumn, apples finally falling with soft plops of spitting goo. Zoey kept little bear well away from them. Like a animal stretching off winter, he yawned and they finally saw limbs reach beyond the bed covers, a long, white, slightly threadbare under vest stretching right over his wrists, clinging tightly to the heavy body, crinkling slightly at the bulges. His beard never seemed to grow Zoey remembered thinking. Not a very pretty sight was her mother's reflection as they sat in the door way, spell bound like kids in a pre internet generation when stories were etched out over fluttering flames, dark shadows romping behind the fireplace as old men and women hackled and cackled scaring the shit out of all ages. He farted loudly. Noses wrinkled in the haze. The room needed an airing.

"You need to change those trousers her mother remarked."

"Leggings," she corrected. They hid her legs nicely, soaked up the scabs.

"They're still filthy."

Filthy? Well look at what he was wearing. His legs slowly swung over the edge, a pendulum uncertain as to its route. His mouth bent into a fresh grimace, arms raised slowly over his head, then large fingers rubbed his eyes, carrots poking at jelly. He was looking at his feet as if they were two strangers hanging limply on a clothes line. He twitched one. It moved. The rubbery sensation seemed to strike off memories and make him happy. His mouth wormed into what could have been a smile. He shook the other. The long johns stretched right down and covered his feet. He stood timidly and yawned again. Then, after a pensive pause, a brief wheeze, he gave up and ambled back to bed, tugging the blankets over his head in a gesture of contempt. He hadn't even looked at

them. Mother and daughter remained squatting in the door for half an hour or so, until it was time for food. Reluctantly they left him behind. Only his gentle wheezing, hardly even a snore, accompanied them to the kitchen to be pinged out by a microwave in full swing. Don't worry, we'll have the internet soon her mother promised. Her daughter didn't bother to respond. Little bear knew better.

He repeated the ritual the following day, about the same time, around noon, and for days on end. The procedure was becoming as predictable as a TV soap, a repeat of another Disney cartoon. Zoey didn't mind: she could watch them for hours, again and over again. It all seemed so familiar and comforting but perhaps they had failed to observe the subtle differences. Each day was a growing process, Lego adding itself together, building up until it grew into a wondrous castle leading to infinity. Without noticing, he was suddenly upon them. Day by day he had developed his muscles, increased his stretching powers until he could walk freely and accompany them down the stairs, sit silently on the sofa, mutter gently through a silent frown at first, and then a gradually awakening dawn of a smile, rough teeth hovering behind that static beard, dark brown eyes kindling into what might be a homely fireplace of patience and attention.

They did little but stare, soak up the solitude, that stale air of good will somewhat faded through the ages. He seemed to like the television. It had frightened him at first, a dog hounded by lightening but as it grew on him he sat there quietly hour after hour, a faint constant giggle replacing what had been a resounding snore. Little bear liked him, generously big, gently rounded, slightly smelly, but soft and comfortable like an old blanket, a shoe you never wanted to throw away. Little bear snuggled up to him, enfolding himself in those ancient pajamas, as he wiggled them into shape until they faded into his whitened skin.

"Let's give him some food. He might be hungry."

The tingle of the microwave made him startle. He didn't say anything but they had got to know him well enough to notice the slight curve of an ear, the flicker of an eye out of synch, the flick of a red tongue over pale lips as he attempted to understand, giving in to comforts he had been sleep deprived of for perhaps centuries. The soup went down well. Everything did they discovered. His capacity for sleep was echoed in a devilish devouring of anything put before him on a plate. He seemed to understand knives but was confused by the fork. That bushy beard started growing, a hairy mop, the lusting heaves of a chest still struggling to breathe fresh air, confining a body caged within a man imbedded in a world they could scarcely attempt to comprehend. They let him use his hands. It didn't matter. They'd mop up the mess later.

It was fun. Debra took the car and bought more food. Zoey went with her and they invested in some clothes. Little bear enjoyed himself. So did their visitor, trying on all these novelties. His smile broadened. Sounds formed but faded away into space. Outside he took control, planted some loose slippings he'd found and pared back the apple tree until it looked stark naked but ready for another crop. In return, the internet officially appeared.

They showed him how to surf. He began to take interest and allow his bumbling fingers touch the screen and move icons to one side, into clusters, flittering scraps of information piling together, creating a personal version of reality. Debra hid the image of Zoey's father as it flew over the firewall and landed in their lap, slippery, a fish out of control as it slapped its final kisses in a wave of goodbyes she hoped daughter hadn't noticed. He learned to fiddle while google burned, a child let loose without any notion of net safety or of the damage a bad virus could do. He smiled, a haunting glimpse of long anesthetized emotions. His first shower had freaked him out too, but the two women lapped up the sensation. Suddenly he was smelling like them. They were making him their own. They watched the water tingle and everything seemed to be falling into place. He learned how to turn the tap on and off by himself. Despite his size he was actually quite attractive. Debra bought a razor.

"Yes. Yes. Off you go. "

Everyone was smiling. He grinned, freshly shaved: the shower had been an experience little bear would never forget.

"It's bed time you know."

Zoey had no intention of leaving them alone.

Mother was insisting.

Little bear was offended. Just as he had been with daddy and lots of others who seemed to cling to their sofa far more than was respectable for a little bear.

"Not yet."

His snoring had entrapped them at first and, slowly, gradually, unconsciously, with the inevitable force of gravity he became the lord of the manor they may have been searching for. He was gaining weight. They were losing pounds. They were also beginning to squabble. Not as mother or daughter anymore. It was something different. Zoey refused to go to bed. He held her close so it was difficult to force the issue. Little bear glared. Their timetables were swinging out of control, into orbit. The big bang started in the tiniest fractions of seconds: their implosion, or inflation wasn't designed to last much longer.

"I told you to go to bed."

"You lied."

I what?

"You lied about the internet. We had it all along."

"You lied about daddy."

"You lied."

Her mother sighed, screamed back, then covered her ears to avoid her own anger. She'd known this hideaway would drive them both crazy. She would give

in and get that bloody dog. Did her daughter not understand she needed time to herself, that they were talking about a man and she was just a child?

"Please, just go to bed honey."

Honey held little bear. Scraped off another scap and sat on his knees hoping for a breath of fresh air, the hint of a snore that drifted her off to sleep.

He moved. Uncomfortable. Raised voices were swarming in his head, surging up emotions he thought had been put down long ago. They waved over him as he began to drown in words. His cheeks grimaced, jaws tightened making his beard stand out in a bristle, growing grey, almost white now. They didn't notice, enclosed in the silent fury of their own passions, wrapped up in their own blankets of silence.

"I want my daddy back!"

"Honey."

"Don't call me honey!"

"Sweetie. Please."

"Don't call me sweetie!"

"Don't please me!"

Little bear was being pulled apart.

The shouts, the anger, the garbled complaints, a family struggling to get by, to survive, to live out another oppressive regime. He'd faded away back then, off to bed: and it had worked quite well. Nothing had changed. Fingers began to tap knees, then scratch elbows. He wanted his pyjamas back.

Absorbed in their own in-fighting they failed to observe his increasing droopiness. He rarely ventured out into the orchard anymore. He no longer searched for google. The TV flicked across his face emotionlessly. He was yawning and that beard had grown back. His chest heaved in unequal spasms, air whistling out of tune, breath beginning to ache and smell of half-digested

food, over ripe bananas that hadn't been thrown out. They didn't shower him anymore and he wouldn't dare by himself. Even the new dog didn't cheer him up. In fact it was a relief. Zoey now had an excuse to avoid her mother who in turn had found a type of replacement babysitter. He'd been gone for a day before they missed him. But they could hear the snoring. He was up there.

"Should we wake him up?"

Neither responded. The dog barked. A red cocker spaniel with the cheeky grin of a cat sipping milk, knowing he too was sorted for life. He sniffed around the bedroom door upstairs but refused to enter. Just wagged a tail. The snoring soothing even a fritzzy little dog with little but devilement on his mind. He turned and ran back down the stairs. Pups knew how to improvise. He'd teach them a trick or too.

They locked the door but kept the key just in case. If he woke up again he could knock. We all know how to knock don't we?

*by E. F. S. Byrne*

CONTACT:

Enda Scott

José Maluquer, 15 Blq 7 3-D

41008 Seville,

Spain.

5/02/14

[efs@scottboardman.com](mailto:efs@scottboardman.com)

<http://eflbytes.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.scottboardman.com/lit>