

ECLIPSE

In hindsight, Joan thought perhaps the whole thing could be blamed on the lunar eclipse. Perhaps, if the moon had not turned her a little mad, it would have been a night like any other. After all, wasn't the moon sometimes linked to madness in mythology? Or maybe that was werewolves? Joan wasn't sure, but she did know that lunar eclipses had been considered bad omens in the past. Henry had told her that. Rather than foreshadowing the end times, she thought perhaps this one had simply brought a little madness with it, drifting over the watching people in the streets. Although, she thought, it had almost been a sign, even a cause, of a sort of end time.

Joan had stood outside watching the eclipse with most of her neighbours, the first time she could remember such a neighbourly gathering on her street. She watched the crowd grow as people emerged from their houses, and wondered if they had known about the eclipse, or if they were drawn outside by the equally spooky sight of a crowd gathered in a street usually so empty of non-vehicular movement. Some people brought their children with them, running yelping about like excited puppies. Some greeted each other and settled into conversation as they stood looking upwards, revealing neighbourhood networks she hadn't known existed. Some stood, like her, off to the side, in the crowd but not quite part of it. Several couples stood hand in hand or with arms around each other, gazing up together. Joan looked around at her neighbours. She was cold.

The moon seemed majestic this night, bigger and slower and more patient than the frantic briefness of those stilled for a moment underneath it, bathed in its faint glow. If the dark shape moving across the moon's face had been an ominous appearance, curiosity would have transfixed them all, bugs under glass, standing there until they were pinned to the board.

Joan watched most of the eclipse, standing there in the street after most people got cricks in their necks, found it too cold outside or decided to return in a half an hour when the moon's face was completely covered. After that, Joan went inside too, with one backward look at the moon before it disappeared behind the edge of her roof.

'Get cold?' asked Henry, sitting in front of the television. Little figures ran about on the screen, chasing and kicking a ball. Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. Joan wondered if the eclipse was visible above the stadium.

‘Not really,’ she said, ‘but everyone seemed to be going inside.’

Henry moved his legs off the sofa to make room for her. She went through to the kitchen and put the jug on for a cup of tea. Two cups already sat waiting on the bench, left there for this moment when they’d done the dinner dishes. She went back into the living room and sat down beside Henry. The little men on the television ran up and down, up and down, up and down. Tinny voices cheered and booed. Henry didn’t look up when she sat, his attention held by the running men. He’d stretched himself out, almost off the sofa, his feet crossed in front of him. Joan watched the men on the television too, feeling an odd sense of unreality. She looked at the closed curtains on the windows, felt she could almost see the moon through them.

‘You should come out and look,’ she said, looking over at Henry. ‘It’s really quite something.’

‘Looked on the internet already,’ he said without looking. ‘There’s better pictures there anyway, people with proper telescopes and all.’

‘But that’s not this eclipse. This one’s real, right outside.’

‘So were those ones,’ he said. He looked across at her and laughed. ‘They’re all the same.’

‘But this one is for us,’ she said. ‘We’re the privileged ones who get a good view of this one.’

Henry smiled. ‘Maybe after the game, love,’ he said, and turned back to the television.

In the kitchen, the jug clicked off. Joan got up and went to make the tea. Pour the hot water on the tea bags, dunk and stir, dunk and stir, and drop the used bags on the little saucer by the jug, for re-using next time.

She took Henry’s tea through to him, almost sat down beside him, then took hers outside.

She watched the rest of the eclipse that way, in bursts, going out of the house every ten minutes or so, then back in when she started to feel silly standing there watching not much happen. She couldn’t remember afterwards what she thought about all that time, as the bright clean surface of the moon dwindled and the darkness crept across it, as the colour changed from bright white to

dull yellow, and then, after the shadow had fully crossed its face, to a sort of luminous orange-red.

She was surprised somehow that she could still see it, that in a total lunar eclipse the moon itself was still visible. Surely an eclipse should bring an apocalyptic darkness to the world? Still, she thought she could see how such an unearthly event could make people afraid, could seem to promise disaster. She marvelled at the softness of the light, wondered why it was red. She imagined sitting on the ground watching this in another place, another time, without her camera, without streetlights, without electric light spilling from windows all along the street. She thought perhaps she'd have been afraid.

Something shifted inside Joan as she watched the eclipse. As though she were leaving behind for a brief moment the limited vision of her humanness. She tried to catch the moment on camera, but the moon seemed to get further and further away when she tried to photograph it, receding beyond the reach of the lens and refusing to allow her to capture it. Before its face was thoroughly darkened it appeared in her pictures as a little white blur, an iridescent bug squashed on black paper, because she could not hold her hand still. After it turned dark, it glowed redly in the sky but wouldn't appear on camera at all, a vampire moon with no reflection.

So Joan stopped trying to immortalise the moon in its moment of glory, and just watched. This was a one-night-only performance, no videotaping allowed. It seemed more important to stay out there watching because of the shimmery impermanence of this blood moon. Tomorrow it would be gone, once more pushed into the shadows by its brash white sibling. It was not like itself at all, this moon, not like the pale flat disc she was used to seeing painted onto the dull background of the night sky among the stars. It was more than itself. It hung there, round and fat and deep red-brown, like a smooth hard billiard ball or a giant red golf ball. It seemed impossible that it could remain hanging there. Just like the polystyrene one she'd once helped Ben make. They'd suspended it from invisible thread in a shoebox they'd painted black, part of a model solar system he'd had to make for school. She thought he'd enjoyed that. Strange that it was called a solar system, she thought. Poor moon, spending its whole life in a world named for another, a brighter light.

In one of her brief returns to the house, Joan found the television switched off. Henry's mug was on the bench in the kitchen, neatly rinsed, and Henry himself, in his striped pyjamas, was climbing into bed.

'Oh,' she said. 'Off to bed already?'

'It's getting late, love,' he said, pulling up the covers. 'I've got an early start tomorrow.'

'Sure you won't come out to see it, before it's over?'

Henry looked mildly exasperated. 'I'm in my pyjamas now. Really, it's okay. I can look online tomorrow if it's important to you.'

'Never mind, it's not that important.' Joan leaned over the bed to give Henry a kiss. 'Sleep well,' she said.

'You too. Don't stay out there too long. You'll get cold.'

'I won't.'

Joan left the bedroom and returned outside to her position at the end of the driveway, barefoot on the cold tarseal, on the edge of where the crowd had been standing. She'd forgotten to put on her shoes again. Everyone had gone in now, and she was alone with the moon. While she stood there in the lowering frost, lights slowly flicked off in windows along the street, warm yellow pools of light on the pavement there one moment and gone the next. Joan's breath hung in the air in front of her, little clouds of misty vapour. She tried to make smoke rings with them, but they remained shapeless, ethereal.

After a while, she realised her hands were stinging. Henry had been right, she had gotten cold. She hadn't put on gloves, and almost couldn't feel her feet. Perhaps it was time to go inside. Henry might be wondering if she was okay, might be wishing she would come to bed. She looked at the moon for a moment more, saying goodbye for the next several years. Or till whenever it might visit again.

She opened the house door, kicked off her shoes, and went quietly through to the bedroom, stopping in the kitchen on the way for a glass of water. Henry was a still lump in the bed, asleep, making snoring noises so soft she could barely hear them.

She got ready for bed as quietly as she could, cleaning her teeth, washing her face, putting on her warm flannel nightie. She slid into bed beside Henry, icy feet held carefully away from his bed-warmed body. He didn't stir.

She lay awake for a while, not feeling at all like sleep. A spider crawled slowly across the ceiling, embarked on a magnificent adventure. She watched it walk above her head, held her breath in case it fell into her face and made her shriek and flap her hands and wake Henry. It didn't take long to cross the ceiling and reach the wall after all. Destination apparently not reached, it kept walking, down the wall, until she lost sight of it behind the dresser. She rolled over onto her side and looked at the opposite wall, staring until the faded green roses on the wallpaper blurred into each other. Out of the corner of her eye, through the open bedroom door, she could see the blue flash of Henry's cellphone charging in the study. Its tiny light seemed magnified by the dark, an eerie disco under the desk. Joan imagined Sally's Barbies coming out of the dolls' house, out of their packing box in the wardrobe, dressed in their party dresses and little plastic high heels, dancing the night away. She rolled over again and cuddled against Henry's back. He grunted softly.

Henry hadn't understood tonight, Joan thought. He hadn't taken part in her delight, her fear, her fascination. He hadn't been interested earlier, either, in her stories about her day. Nor in the new spring blossoms she'd spotted in their garden and pointed out to him, nor when she had come home from the library and told him about the man who'd been singing opera loudly as he walked along the pavement, nor last weekend when she'd stood in the middle of a rising flock of cockatoos and shrieked with the thrill of their wingbeats around her. Not for a long time.

He looked grim even in his sleep, she thought, sitting herself up a little in bed so she could look at him. Breathing in and out through an open mouth, a little grunting snore at the top of each breath. Stomach a soft bulge under the sheets, hair thinning on top, face growing rounder than when she'd first known him. Before they'd gotten old, before they'd raised and sent into the world three children, before she'd realised her life had been obscured behind his.

Joan looked at Henry, tracing the shape of his face with her mind, trying to recall how it felt to watch him sleep earlier in their life together, trying to remember the thrill of his presence the very first time she slept with a man in her bed. Illicitly, when her parents had gone away with injunctions that she should behave while they were gone. She recalled it as though it had happened to someone else, somewhere else, some other time.

She lay back in the bed and watched the ceiling again, thinking about getting up and throwing on her old robe and returning outside to look at the eclipse some more. But she was worried she might wake Henry, and then he would want to know where she was going, and he would say something sensible about it being too cold, or the eclipse being finished, and she would end up by agreeing and taking her robe off and climbing back into bed while he grunted and rolled over and fell immediately back to sleep.

She looked at Henry again. Suddenly she wanted to push him out of bed. She stifled a laugh, but not enough. He muttered in his sleep and bounced himself over onto his other side. What would he do if she pushed him onto the floor? Would he think he'd had a violent dream and fallen out? Or would he have a dream memory of her hands on his back shoving? Would they have a row, like the couple across the street she'd listened to while she stood outside watching the moon being swallowed?

Joan sighed, rolled herself over, studied Henry's back. After twenty-five years it was as familiar as her own face. Far more familiar than her own back, which she'd never yet managed to see, though she'd tried over and over, hoping to assess Henry's claim that she had a beautiful back. Now she probably never would, because even if she suddenly became fabulously flexible and bent herself right around to look, it would be worn and wrinkled like her dishcloth.

She thought again about getting up, wondered what the moon was doing. And what other people were doing. How many people were awake in the city this Wednesday night? Taxi drivers, eclipse watchers, nightshift workers, perhaps a few drinkers and homeless people. Maybe a few plagued by insomnia, worry, boredom. She thought about the strangeness of the fact that at that very moment people on the other side of the world were getting up, rousing themselves for another day, or already in the midst of it, ordering coffee or changing nappies or adding up numbers in a budget. Despite all the diagrams and graphs and demonstrations with oranges and ping pong balls that Henry had given her in increasing exasperation, she couldn't picture it, still

couldn't quite grasp how the sun got in the way of the moon. Or perhaps it was the earth. Whichever.

It was hard to even believe in the reality of other places when you were not in them, she thought. Whether they were places seen on TV, like the Taj Mahal or the Pyramids, that were too elaborate to be real, or places once inhabited, visited, loved and lived in, their reality faded when you left them, and the flat photographs you had left somehow cemented their unreality. When Henry had gone on his one big international conference for work last year, her mind had been unable to grasp that he was on the other side of a ball of dirt, though she had looked at the globe and measured the distance around and through, as if she had been going to cut a tunnel straight to him. Even when his voice issued faint and thready from the telephone, assuring her his hotel was fine and he was enjoying himself, some part of her brain refused to believe it, thought it was all an elaborate hoax and he was just around the corner, making it all up. She wondered if the man in the moon felt like that about his other side.

Joan sighed again. She looked over to the window, hidden behind its thick dark velvet curtain. The ones she had made when she was a new housewife, the best there'd ever been at interior decorating and cooking and childcare and delivering slippers and papers in the evening. She thought about what was on the other side. It felt almost as though the moon were calling her, and she felt again that strange desire to get up and go outside, just in her nightie, and let the cold night air bring goosebumps to her arms and wrap itself around her legs. And she felt afraid, as if the moon were a siren and if she went out she might not come back, and Henry would wake in the morning to no trace of her, and wonder where she had gone in the warmth of the sleepy night.

Moving without giving her legs permission, her legs swung themselves down onto the ground and she sat up. It was cold out of bed, and she almost lay back down under the covers. But she seemed to have made a decision, and she found herself wondering vaguely which part of her had decided it and when.

She stood up and moved to the end of the bed, knelt on the rough pile carpet and carefully pulled her suitcase out from under the bed. It was dusty and squashed, with the look of something that had not expected to be used again, something that waited to be passed on to the children of children to play in. She brushed off the dust, slowly, staring down at it.

Standing up again, she pulled it over to the wardrobe, forgetting all about waking Henry. Opened the doors and looked at rows of clothes that had not kept up with her view of herself, that had somehow conspired to make her look old before her time, like someone's granny. She felt a sudden hatred for them all, threw armloads on the ground and stamped upon them. Then she felt guilty, picked them all up and re-hung them. A selected few favourites, those she could not make the journey to another world without, she piled into the suitcase. No thought for folding or number of pairs of clean knickers per day. She threw some shoes in on top, her jewellery case, her makeup bag with the same lipsticks she'd had when her youngest graduated from university five years ago. She pushed the lid of the case down and sat on it. She looked at Henry.

He slept on. She sat there for five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, till he blurred from a distinct being to a lump. She listened to his snores, his rhythmic satisfaction with life and sleep. She sighed.

Joan sat up straighter. She got off the case and opened it back up. She put the jewellery case on the dresser, the makeup bag beside it, the shoes under the bed. The clothes she hung back in the wardrobe. She pushed the suitcase back under the bed, shoving it a little to convince it to move. Henry muttered in his sleep again and bounced around as the suitcase pushed something else which pushed upward onto him. Joan climbed back into bed. She resumed looking at the ceiling. The spider was long gone, hadn't reappeared from behind the dresser, and she supposed the eclipse would be over now too. She watched the ceiling until it became darkness and she fell asleep.

The suitcase sat under the bed, no longer dusty, among a collection of forgotten dusty things. Movement on the bed above caused a little flurry of motes to settle on it. A spider fell out of the mattress and onto the suitcase, walked along its top, and began to spin a precarious web connecting suitcase and bed. Joan began to snore a little, light sounds blending with Henry's deeper ones.

The moon, its white self again, shone on.