

Nighties under Anoraks

By Catherine E Weeks

One morning in May, an hour before sunrise, Esme Miller was lucky enough to hear the dawn chorus for the second time in her life and at that moment realised that she had to stop sleeping with a married man.

At first she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering what had woken her. Everything was silent. It was three minutes to four o'clock. She rose and stumbled through her uncurtained flat, guided by the yellow light from the streetlamp.

She made a coffee, pulling her dressing gown around her and by instinct opened the window. She couldn't see the Thames. Just a dark ditch. Streetlights dotted their way along the embankment to Albert Bridge. There were no cars. No distant hiss of traffic. The trees stood still, like an expectant audience. And then through the stillness came the sound of the first bird.

It was a haunting, distinct sound. One simple-witted bird announcing the start of a new day and then suddenly backtracking, changing its mind - rushing her back to a time that no longer existed.

The first one's a blackbird, Ez. She could see her father sat beside her, his shoulders hunched in excitement, his face smudged with recent sleep. They were sat on dewy deckchairs in their back garden - steam rising from her father's plastic cup of tea, Esme unable to get past the unprecedented thrill of wearing her nightie underneath her anorak. *The next one will be a robin. There he goes! And then the song thrush. Hark. Hear him?*

The dawn chorus birds were all male, her father had explained; they were marking territory, courting the females. Aged eight, Esme's eyes had widened in the early light, marvelling at it being such a man's world.

Her life had been about marvel then. Marvel at how thick and warm the milk was in the bottles in the school yard; at the smoothness of hazelnut shells; at how pretty the creamy primroses were even after she pressed them in her nature diary; at how long prayers went on for in the chapel on Sundays. Guilt used to be a part of her life then too. It used to twist through her as naturally and effortlessly as the brook flowing at the bottom of the garden. Guilt for stepping on a ladybird, for washing a fly down the plughole, for crushing the masses of tiny red spiders on the wall in order to draw with them.

The blackbird flew Esme back to the present and she was sat again by her window, drinking coffee, wearing her dressing gown. The robin joined in and then the

song thrush. It didn't matter how many years had passed by. Her father had known the sequence of the birds then and the birds knew it still - acting out some unwritten ceremony with the precision of a conference. Her father had died shortly after the dawn chorus in the garden, but still the birds sang on.

Why this morning, she thought? Why the dawn chorus now after all these years? Some people went their entire lives without ever hearing it, her father had said. He hadn't wanted her to be one of those people. He had wanted her to be alive whilst living.

Was she alive any more? She went to work each day to a job in which she took no delight. She rarely went home to Somerset to visit her mother and brother. She didn't go to church any more. There was no one significant in her life, aside from a married man who slept with his wife and tucked a little girl into bed each night who called him daddy and thought he was the strongest, most handsome, most perfect man in the world.

She often thought about the little girl, Lily, imagining her innocent eyes to be green and dark lashed. The thought of Lily bothered her more than the thought of Madeleine, the wife. Madeleine had tricked him into marriage, he said. She was a nurse, a controller. She had taken advantage of him when he was going through a dark phase. Esme had no idea what that meant, but imagined grey corridors, metal equipment, heavy doors banging shut. Esme felt no affiliation to Madeleine, no sense of duty to the sisterhood of which they were both a part.

Esme sighed and upon consulting her watch decided that she should try to get a little more sleep before work.

"What's brought this on, hey?" He touched her chin gently, turning her face round to examine her expression. She watched his eyes clouding, his pupils narrowing to pencil dots.

"I don't know." She sat up, pulling the bed sheets up to her shoulders, disapproving suddenly of her own nakedness.

"Esme..." He sat up to join her, tucking her hair behind her shoulder officiously as though it were his own. He did this - had sudden bursts of energy when he became focused and energised as though he hadn't really been present until now. "I've been meaning to tell you something..."

She picked her nightie up and put it on, feeling its polyester crinkle, her hair rising with static. Her mother had bought it for her recently, the sort of childish nightwear that she might have bought Esme as a child. Perhaps that was how she still saw Esme. It wasn't as if Esme had given her much else to go by.

“Are you listening?” he said, frowning at the nightie with confusion. Esme never wore clothes around him, especially not in bed. But he wasn’t going to be distracted by this. He had something to say. He was kneeling before her on the duvet - naked, hairy-chested, awash with enthusiasm. “I’m leaving Madeleine. I love you. More than I have ever loved anyone. I want to move to Somerset with you. I know you want to go back there. I’m tired of London too. Let’s get away. Make a fresh start. Grow pumpkins in our back garden.”

“Pumpkins?” said Esme, staring at him.

“Yes,” he said, laughing. “Anything you want. I love you. You’re my sunshine. Here...I bought you this.” He jumped up and reached for his suit jacket that was hanging on the back of the chair.

“I heard the dawn chorus this morning,” she said, moving to the window and looking out at the evening traffic struggling along the embankment.

“Yeah?” he said. He was going through his briefcase, rummaging through pockets. “Damn, I thought it was-”

“It changed everything,” she said.

“Huh?” Something in her voice made him stop. He was holding a small paper bag in his hand. He sat down promptly, heavily, on the edge of the bed, clutching the bag between his legs like a makeshift fig leaf. He felt it too - the sense that they shouldn’t be naked any more, as though a parent had suddenly flicked on the lights and stopped the music at a teenage disco.

“I felt guilty,” she said. “For the first time in years. All day long it’s been pressing upon me and it’s felt really good, you know?” She smiled, despite not feeling happy.

“No, I don’t know. What are you talking about?”

She shrugged and left the bedroom, feeling the need for a cup of green tea, something to soothe her dryness, to smooth the way. He followed her, wearing his suit trousers, his chest bare. She felt a flutter of attraction, despite the circumstances, feeling the surge of arousal that often preceded rejection - a final taste of something. He was incredibly handsome, but he hadn’t been hers to keep. She had borrowed him, that was all, and now he was to be returned. A little more dog-eared, but otherwise unchanged.

“You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you?” he said, his voice weighted with sorrow. She considered that this was the dark phase he had spoken of, the reason for his sudden energy rushes: he was up and down, emotionally uncontrolled. Not in a mad man way. In a hard to break up with way.

“Please, Esme,” he said, reaching his hand out to her. “Don’t. You’ll break my heart.”

She stopped stirring her tea and surveyed him. She hadn’t expected this. She should have, but she hadn’t. “I won’t break your heart,” she said. “I’m not your wife. I don’t have that power.”

“It’s not power. It’s a bloody marriage certificate,” he said, pressing his hands against his head in despair. “It’s just a piece of paper. You have the power. You’re the woman I love. Take my offer, Esme. Move away with me.”

She sat down by the window where she had sat this morning. How changed everything was, and yet it all appeared just the same. “What about Lily?” she said.

He opened his mouth to reply and then closed it again. There was no reply. He scratched his stubbled face and sat down at the table, his head in his hands.

“She’ll be all right,” he said, finally, looking up with tired, defeated eyes. “She’ll get over it.”

“No,” Esme said. “No she won’t.”

After he had gone, she moved around the bedroom in her usual routine - straightening sheets, moisturising the little kissing patch on her chin where his stubble had scratched her, hanging up her eagerly-shed work clothes. As she picked up her skirt, she noticed a little paper package underneath the bed. It was the bag he had been holding. He had dropped it, forgotten it in his angst.

She chose to sit back down by the open window in the lounge with the evening breeze touching her face as she opened the bag. Inside was a silver chain upon which was a small pendant in the shape of a smiling sunshine. She felt tears prick her eyes. He had always called her his sunshine. She wondered at his life being so dark before he had met her, wondered whether it would rain from henceforth without her. Whether he would be okay. Whether she really had broken his heart, or whether he would climb back happily into bed tonight and kiss Madeleine’s shoulder, glad to return to where he belonged.

She would call him in the morning. She had to know which way it was. Whether he really loved her, really meant his offer to move. Would she move with him if the answer were to her liking?

And then something caught her eye at the bottom of the bag. A piece of paper. A receipt. She unfolded it and read:

Novelty sunshine pendant	£4.99
Gold chain	£349.00

It had been Madeleine’s birthday last week, she recalled.

He had shopped for them in the same store, thought of them both in one moment, in one transaction. Cheap metal for the mistress; gold for the wife.

She sat for a long while turning the metal sunshine around in her hand, feeling its spiky turrets of flames, staring at its fabricated smile, its dented eyes.

She had been right about Lily - to think about her. Aged six, Lily would know all about love and hope and disappointment. She would feel these emotions every day - wondering each time her dad came home late whether maybe some day he wouldn't come home at all.

Shivering, she closed the window and reached absent-mindedly for her running jacket. Huddled with her knees drawn against her, she felt pitifully alone. And then suddenly she caught sight of her reflection in the window and smiled. She was wearing her nightie underneath her anorak.