

a novella-in-flash



# DINOSAUR

A D A M L O C K





# DINOSAUR

Adam Lock

## **Dinosaur**

© 2019 Adam Lock

ISBN: 978-1-9161076-1-8

Published by EllipsisZine.com

Designed by Steve Campbell

Cover artwork by John Gill

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For Sarah

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank all my writer friends who have helped shape the stories in this novella through reading and critiques: Chris M Drew, Marissa Hoffman, and Gaynor Jones. Special thanks must go to Jason Jackson, Peter Jordan, and Stephanie Hutton, who spent time reading and critiquing the whole novella.

Thanks also go to John Gill for his beautiful artwork; I feel very lucky to have this piece of art on the cover.

I want to thank Johanna Robinson for her diligent proofreading.

I'd like to thank my parents for their support in everything I've chosen to pursue, and my two beautiful children for not once moaning at me for disappearing behind my laptop. I am aware of how selfish a writer can be, and so I want to give dearest thanks to my wonderful partner, Sarah, who has always encouraged me. Her love, support, and demands for early morning cups of tea have helped me wake early each morning to write.

Thanks also go to Meg Pokrass, STORGY Magazine, Spelk Fiction, TSS Publishing, and Fictive Dream for taking the time to write wonderful and kind testimonials.

I would also like to thank Steve Campbell for his consistent support, from the moment I first submitted to Ellipsis Zine, to now, and the publication of this Novella-in-Flash. Having this opportunity means a great deal to me; I will always be grateful.

Lastly, I would like to thank the flash fiction community, who have been welcoming and supportive from the very beginning. I hope I can repay the kindness I have been shown.

Thank you for taking the time to read *Dinosaur*. It means a lot.

*Adam*

“[...] It never moves more than three times in a lifetime. Did it really move?”

“Yes,” the girl said. “Truly.”

Ernest Hemingway  
*For Whom the Bell Tolls*



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## Side A

No one has told him so, but Erik is sure his dad is Jim Morrison.

His dad left behind his LPs — hundreds of them, in rows across the floor, against two walls in the spare room.

Downstairs, Erik's mum and her boyfriend are arguing again.

Erik leafs through the LPs and finds The Doors' best album: *Morrison Hotel*.

Beneath the window is a record player, amplifier and two tall, wooden speakers. He handles *Morrison Hotel* the way his dad showed him, his hand catching the white paper insert. Resting it in his palm, he reveals the black vinyl. With it held between two rigid palms, he lowers his head, closes one eye and blows. He threads the record onto the turntable, slides back the plastic switch on the front right corner, positions himself so he can see where the needle touches the spinning record, holds his breath and drops it.

Side A. The crackle of vinyl. Guitar. Drums. Morrison shouts: yeah. Harmonica. Piano. Morrison's voice. 'Roadhouse Blues.'

Erik sits on the floor, his legs crossed, eyes level with the record, fixed on the lift and dip of the needle as it spins through its spiral from the outer edge to the centre.

He taps his leg in time with the beat. His dad is somewhere in America, in a motel, lying on a bed, dressed in an open black shirt, brown leather trousers, cowboy boots, a guitar leaning against the wall, a bottle of bourbon on the side table next to a cigarette that burns in a brown glass ashtray.

The door opens. It's Max, his mum's boyfriend.

'Great song.'

Erik sighs, moves onto his knees and turns down the volume, nudging the record player so it skips.

'Careful,' Max says. 'You'll scratch it.'

It's Max's fault for being there and making him turn it down.

'Shame,' Max says. 'Morrison, Hendrix, Joplin, Wilson, that guitarist from The Stones — what was his name? Brian Jones.'

Erik turns to the LPs in a row against the wall and flicks through them.

'All of them. Dead at twenty-seven. Strange huh?'

Erik stops at Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*.

'Anyway, your mum says you shouldn't be in here. Told me to tell you.'

Morrison, dead.

Erik had no idea.

Max leaves and Erik sits back on his heels. The room is warmer, musty and close. Crying is not something he does these days.

He lifts the needle, flips over the record to side B, and drops the needle onto track four: 'Indian Summer'.

Soft guitar. Far-away drums. Echoing vocals.

A tear falls onto track three. The record spins, and the tear crawls to track two, then track one, until finally it falls over the edge.

## Spacefrog

Rebecca's mum turns off the radio and switches on the TV, which is strange because the TV is never turned on until much later. Behind the man talking on the TV is the sign: Newsnight Special. Her mum sits on the edge of the settee with her hands on her knees. The man on the TV says the spacecraft *Challenger* has exploded sixty seconds into its flight. Her mum covers her mouth, then an American man explains how the president found out what happened. He was in his Oval Office. There are pictures of the explosion. There was a parachute and they're looking for survivors. Next thing there's video of *Challenger's* rockets firing to lift it off the ground. The spacecraft turns gently in the sky. They don't show the explosion. It switches to an interview from the year before, with a woman astronaut who was on the space shuttle. She is American. She is a teacher and has one of her pupils with her. His name is Scott. Scott says his frog is going into space. It's hard to make out, but it sounds like the frog's name is Beagle.

'Is the frog really going into space?' Rebecca asks her mum.

Her mum doesn't say anything, only shakes her head.

The woman astronaut kisses the boy, who wipes his cheek where she kissed him. The woman astronaut laughs and is very pretty with curly hair and bright eyes.

Rebecca sighs, and asks, 'Will the frog be okay?'

Halley's comet takes roughly seventy-five years to orbit the earth. The last time Halley's comet was here was in 1910. Her mum wasn't even born then. Rebecca's mum says her nan or grandad weren't even born then.

At school Rebecca has been learning all about Halley's comet. She helped make a huge collage using bits from newspapers and magazines to show the comet and its tail whooshing across the back wall of the classroom.

Halley's comet appeared in 1066 and is on the Bayeux Tapestry. After the Battle of Hastings people saw it as a bad omen for King Harold but a good omen for William the Conqueror. Some people think Halley's comet might have been the Star of Bethlehem.

Every night, it is cloudy and there is no sign of it.

'You can see it the next time it comes,' her mum says, smiling.

'That's ages away,' Rebecca says. '2061.'

'You'll be watching it from Mars or on a space station by then. No clouds.'

'Will *you*?' Rebecca asks.

Her mum waits, then pushes hair behind Rebecca's ear. 'Of course. We can watch it together.'

Something about the way her mum looks up at the sky makes Rebecca think of the pretty schoolteacher astronaut, the frog, and the little boy listening to a voice count down from ten.

## A Transformation

Erik drops Optimus Prime on the bed, opens the wardrobe doors and finds his Christmas present, Grimlock, hidden behind handbags and shoes. Dinobots, unlike Autobots that are vehicles, are dinosaurs. Grimlock is a Tyrannosaurus rex.

He picks at the tape on the box, before clenching his fists and rolling over to transform Optimus Prime from robot to truck.

After spraying perfume onto the bed, he takes the lid off a tube of lipstick. Earlier, his mum wiped the lipstick across her lips after he told her he was too ill to go to school.

Inside her top drawer is an opened box of condoms. There's an empty wrapper and two other condoms in silver packets. He pinches the circle inside the shiny packet between finger and thumb. He drops it back into the drawer.

Beneath the window is a chest of drawers. In the second drawer is a jumble of underwear: a tangle of thin straps, nylon and lace. He finds three cellophane-wrapped packets of tights. One of them is different from the other two, in that they are 'hold-ups'. The picture on this packet is also different: a woman wearing only underwear and hold-ups, laughing, her head thrown back, her mouth a large pink-and-white O.

It's automatic: he takes off his trousers and underwear, then threads one of the hold-ups onto his left foot. It's tight around his toes, ankle, shin, calf. He moves them along his legs with the same careful pulling and twisting motion his mum uses. When they reach his thigh the elastic pulls his hairs. Letting go, the stockings snap against his skin. He puts on the other stocking.

He rips open one of the silver condom packets and the condom falls into his lap. He's tried it before, but it was nothing like Noah and Josh said it was.

When he pushes it against himself, it slips from between his fingers and falls onto the duvet. He unravels it and rolls it onto himself before there is a turning in his stomach, a lift and drop all at once. Holding himself, he clenches his thighs around his hands.

His stomach aches in a different place, in a place deeper inside, further below. He gasps like he's been under water and has come up for air. Slowly, he opens his legs and the condom comes away in his hand, smells of rubber and something else, something sour.

He takes off the hold-ups, then dresses and tidies the room.

Still inside the box, Grimlock-as-Dinosaur is nowhere near as big or as fearsome as it is on TV.

He pushes the boxed Dinobot to the back of his mum's wardrobe. It makes no sense that a robot should transform into a dinosaur.

The woman on the hold-ups packet makes his stomach tighten with a warm ache. He folds the picture once, then again, and threads it into his trouser pocket, before leaving the room, Optimus Prime-as-Truck, left on the bed.

## Cake is Nothing to be Scared of

On the dining room table are ten large cakes in the shape of numbers, set out from zero to nine.

Rebecca's mum adds several drops of blue dye to the icing mixture.

'Now I'll show you how to decorate them. Your nan would make a birthday cake in the shape of a number for your grandad, for me and for herself.'

She stirs with a wooden spoon, her head shaking in time with the motion.

'Without fail — every birthday. And I've done the same for you, your dad and me. Your birthday tomorrow will be no different.'

She nods at the cake at the end of the row.

'Remember: you only need two shapes.'

Her mum points to the two cake tins.

'A loaf tin. And a Bundt tin. These are all you need.'

She moves the number eight cake to the front of the table.

'We'll have a go with this one.'

Her mum uses a wide, flat knife to spread the blue icing. It's lumpy at first, but before long the cake is covered in smooth, blue icing.

'This will take practice,' her mum says, as she swirls the piping bag across the top of the cake, Rebecca's name appearing one letter at a time.

'Your turn,' she says, and hands Rebecca the piping bag.

Rebecca leans over the cake. She squeezes the bag and a ball of icing falls onto the kitchen worktop.

'That's okay,' her mum says. 'It takes time.'

Rebecca glances at her mum.

'Go on.' Her mum nods towards the cake. 'Cake's nothing to be scared of. It's cake. Just cake.'

The tangle of icing begins to look something like a word. When she's done, Rebecca breathes again. Her mum sits on a chair, an arm held across her stomach, her eyes closed like something hurts.

'Done,' Rebecca says.

Her mum opens her eyes. 'Good. I need you to remember how to make each number. Can you do that?'

Rebecca nods and places the piping bag on the table.

'Rebecca,' her mum says. 'It's a lovely name: Rebecca. Your dad chose it. Whenever anyone asks your name, tell them it's Rebecca. Not Becky, or Becka or Becks. It's Rebecca. Promise me?'

'Promise.'

Her mum cuts into the number eight and hands Rebecca a slice. They eat the cake, and her mum runs through the recipe one more time, asking Rebecca to recite the proportions,

the method, the oven temperature and timings.

Rebecca wants to ask why she's showing her all this now, why the details are so important, why she has looked her in the eyes more times today than usual.

When her dad gets home from work, he has with him her birthday present: a ginger cat called Tom.

Lying in bed, Rebecca listens to her mum and dad talking about the gas and electric bills. Her mum's voice sounds the way it did when she spoke to her about the cake: serious, exact, like she was saying it for the last time.

She listens to the cat, whining to be let out; it sounds like someone crying.

## Cold Pizza

The first time Erik's mum ordered delivered pizza was the day his dad left. The reason for the second delivered pizza is unclear.

The opened pizza box is on his bedroom floor, the pizza uneaten, cold, the cheese glistening like plastic. Max, his mum's boyfriend, is the one who told him how good cold pizza is, the same night they watched *Weird Science*. For his birthday, Max bought him the poster of Kelly LeBrock that's on his bedroom wall.

He sits staring at a bloody fingernail. He'd trapped it in the bedroom door, closing it before the cat got in. The cat is old and smells.

Held up to the moon shining through the open window, his hand trembles, part of a fingernail dangling. The blood has stopped dripping and the skin is blistered. In the sky is one of the bears — major or minor — he can't be sure which, even though Max has explained it many times. Ursa Major. Ursa Minor. Ursa is Latin for bear.

He squeezes the end of his finger until a bead of red appears. It trembles, then drops onto the pizza, dead-centre of a coin of pepperoni.

His mum and Max are arguing. Max says his mum doesn't do snide, only full-on menace.

'You put your dick inside another woman!'

This, then, is the reason for the second delivered pizza.

The front door slams.

Erik will have to look up the bear constellations himself.

He takes a slice of pizza and bites into it. Cold pizza is good.

Max told him the bears in the sky were used by sailors for navigation. He also said there's only one thing better than cold pizza. Erik asked what it was but Max didn't say, only smiled.

He takes another bite of cold pizza. On the *Weird Science* poster, Kelly LeBrock's hair is curly, her eyes dark, her lips red.

He stops chewing.

## Tom, Jerry and Immortality

Rebecca's dad places Tom in the hole next to her mum's gravestone.

'See anyone?' he asks.

Rebecca stands on tip-toe to check the cemetery, then shakes her head.

Tom's ginger fur shines against the black earth. When she moves her feet closer, dirt tumbles down the sides of the hole. Tom is small, curled up on himself, his tongue lolling from his mouth, his paws tiny.

Her dad takes the trowel leaning against her mum's headstone and offers it to her.

'It's okay, love. Go on.'

They didn't choose the name; Tom came to them as a Tom on her birthday. The reason her dad agreed to take him in was because of his name. Even now, her dad insists they watch *Tom and Jerry* together. She doesn't know why, but it doesn't make her laugh any more.

'We should hurry,' her dad says.

She buries the trowel into the heap of earth and pushes it into the hole. Soon there is only a small clump of Tom's ginger fur sticking up out of the dirt.

When she's done, she stands and gives her dad the trowel.

'Maybe we could have a mouse,' her dad says.

As her dad tidies the ground, she wonders why cats have ginger fur, mice have tails and her mum painted fingernails, if one day it will all be buried.

She doesn't like *Tom and Jerry*. They're mean to one another. And whatever they do, no one gets into trouble, and no one dies.

She takes her dad's hand and leads the way out of the cemetery, all the time imagining the earth turned inside out, flipped onto its back, revealing cities of skeletons in which the dead outnumber the living a hundred times over.

## Lavender

Erik wakes to the room spinning, a full bladder and the scent of lavender.

His mum's shadow slides across the walls in the hallway. Through an open doorway he sees her in the kitchen, standing in front of patio doors that look out onto the garden.

She's naked.

He doesn't look at her neck, the side of her breast, the small of her back. He doesn't look at her thighs, her calves, her ankles.

Moving slowly on the settee, dressed in only his underwear, he covers himself because he's hard and needs to piss, and if she sees he's there on the night he shouldn't be, she'll want to know why.

She reaches between her legs and wipes the inside of her thigh. Lifting her hands above her head, she stretches to stand on tip-toe, like she's ready to dive into a swimming pool.

She moves out of view and there's the sound of her filling a glass of water, then a second, which makes no sense. He looks at the ceiling.

His mum carries two glasses of water upstairs. Her feet pad across the landing above and there's muffled laughter. One time, when he was small, hearing the same kind of laughter, he'd walked in on his mum and dad doing it.

The laughter stops and there's a male voice he doesn't recognise.

He dresses, slides open the patio door, and walks across the lawn. He tries to piss but it hurts. Then it starts and he's watering the fence and the flowers.

He fastens his trousers and sits on the swing beneath the tree at the end of the garden.

Candlelight flickers in his mum's bedroom, throwing her shadow onto the vertical blinds. She rocks back and forth, and he is moving back and forth on the swing, and they are moving in time with one another, back and forth, and through the open window he listens to her and a man he doesn't know.

He plants his feet on the grass, nausea building.

Then his mum's shadow isn't moving and someone blows out the candle.

He walks across the lawn towards the garden gate. His leg brushes a row of plants, bruising their scent.

When he bought the candle, the lady in the shop explained how lavender aids sleep. This is what he told his mum. When she held the candle to her nose, she smiled and muttered the word 'sleep', like it meant something different.

Originally published online by New Flash Fiction Review, September 2018.

## Everybody Hurts

Rebecca's mum told her to never let anyone call her anything other than Rebecca.

'Becca,' Janey says, smiling. 'Where'd you steal them?'

Rebecca drops two cellophane-wrapped cassettes onto the bed.

'Our Price.'

Janey pushes open a window, checks outside, then takes out a small box from the chest of drawers next to the wardrobe, opens it and hands Rebecca a cigarette.

'Mum won't be back for hours,' Janey says.

They sit on the windowsill and blow smoke through the open window.

'You listened to Madonna's new one?' Janey asks. 'Can't believe you don't have a CD player yet, Becca. I'll record Madonna's new one for you. *Erotica*. It's brilliant.'

There are CDs laid out on the bed. Some of the cases are open, some cracked, sleeves opened and folded over.

Rebecca shrugs. 'Sure.'

Janey rests her cigarette in the ashtray, finds the CD and presses play.

'The opening track is the best,' Janey says.

Three tracks into the album, Rebecca looks through the CDs. There is one, unopened: REM's *Automatic for the People*.

'Dad bought it,' Janey says. 'Don't like REM. His voice.'

'Me neither,' Rebecca says.

When Janey leaves to get drinks, Rebecca unwraps the REM album and plays it. She skips to track four because of the title: 'Everybody Hurts'.

Lighting another cigarette, she sits by the window. Outside is an old man walking a dog, and because of the music, she and the old man and his dog are in a music video. She raises her chin and holds the cigarette next to her lips like the woman in *Basic Instinct*, inhales deeply, holds the smoke in her mouth and, letting the camera zoom into her face, blows out. There's the simple rise and fall of the chords, the violins, the organ and his voice, like he's really hurting. The drums kick in and the song rises, and outside the old man reaches down and strokes his dog, and she's crying in harmony with the climax of the song, and it's all captured in a music video and is on MTV. The singer repeats, 'Hold on', over and over.

She stubs out her cigarette and wipes her eyes. The old man and the dog walk around the corner, out of sight, and a voice in her head shouts, 'cut!'.

The song ends and Janey comes into the room with two cans of lager and a plate of sandwiches, and sees the open REM case.

'Told you it was no good.' Janey puts the sandwiches and lagers on the bed. 'Depressing as hell.'

'I like it.'

Janey pauses, blushing. 'Keep it then, Becca.' She waits, then smiles. 'Oh right — you

still don't have a CD player.'

Rebecca stands and takes her blank cassettes from the bed.

'It's not Becca,' she says. 'It's Rebecca.'

She walks down the stairs and out of the house. On the street, for the cameras, she walks in time with the ringing of plucked guitar strings and the warm harmonics of a keyboard.

## Crushed

Erik buries his face into her coat, inhales and is thrown back to the night spent kissing Jenny on her mum's settee.

Downstairs, people are partying.

Her coat hangs on a bedroom door.

His face burns, across his forehead, the sides of his nose, and chin. He washed three times before he left the house, but still there's the charcoal smell of acne cream.

Inside her coat pocket is a plastic tube. He glances behind, takes off the lid and rolls the base to reveal a pink lipstick. He sniffs it and is back with Jenny on the settee. He slides the tube back into her coat pocket and feels something sharp. He drops three jagged, crescent-shaped nail clippings onto the palm of his hand and nudges them with his own fingernail.

Downstairs there's cheering and the music is turned up. He pushes the nail clippings into his trouser pocket, reaches for his beer and heads to the stairs.

It's been two days since they'd kissed on her mum's settee and he's not seen or heard from her since.

Standing at the top of the stairs, he cups a hand in front of his mouth, breathes out and sniffs.

Jenny is in the living room. She's with a man. He's tall, has long hair, is wearing a long coat, has no acne, looks like Eddie Vedder. They're taking it in turns to whisper loudly. When she sees Erik she stops, stares at the ground and puts a finger to her mouth. Eddie Vedder looks at Erik, then at Jenny, sighs loudly, rolls his eyes and takes her outside by the hand.

Eddie Vedder has a car.

Erik and Jenny kissed for forty minutes. He closes his eyes, recalls a sensation he didn't understand at the time, of her waiting for something more. He opens his eyes. The car shudders and its headlights come on. When he held her breast through her silk shirt, his body shook.

Outside it's drizzling.

The car pulls away and turns right at the end of the road.

He walks in the opposite direction, then starts to run and doesn't stop until he's home.

He lies awake in his bed and, one at a time, places each of Jenny's fingernail clippings on his tongue. They taste of salt and scratch on the way down.

## With the Lights Out, it's Less Dangerous

Rebecca takes the apple from her bag and bites into it, her fingers sliding across its skin, juice in her palm. She licks her fingers. Sour.

She sits on the garden bench and checks her watch. The curtains in her dad's bedroom are closed. Another twenty minutes. He'll leave for work at seven, assume she's in her room.

The sun is rising.

She takes another bite but stops chewing. A child's memory of a worm burrowing into an apple one side and coming out the other makes her turn the apple in her hand. Nothing.

Two days ago, Kurt Cobain killed himself. Last night they'd watched MTV non-stop. The four of them: her and Jimmy on one settee, Janey and Michael on the other.

For Rebecca, it's *Nevermind*; for Janey, *Bleach*. There's no Dave Grohl on *Bleach*, whose drumming took Nirvana to another level.

Janey had taken Michael to his bedroom.

'The first three songs on *Nevermind* have guns in the lyrics,' Jimmy told Rebecca.

She knows the lyrics to all their songs by heart.

'Americans and guns,' she said, as an explanation.

Kurt was alone, loading the shotgun.

'He'd have had to use his feet to pull the trigger,' Jimmy had said, opening his mouth and stretching out his arms to hold an imaginary shotgun.

'Don't, Jimmy.'

'What?'

The table was littered with empty cider cans.

They kissed until her jaw and tongue ached.

The TV flickered in the dark — more Nirvana songs, interviews, music experts.

His hand on her thigh, then beneath her skirt. And then it was too much, too sensitive and she held his forearm. To appease him, or to apologise, she rolled on top and kissed him some more. In the silver flickering of the TV, awkward, with limbs, his and hers, there was pushing, him against her, her against him, or along, or through or into, she couldn't be sure. He sighed and moaned, and 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' came on the TV. That riff. Those drums. Then 'Drain You', and Kurt singing about a poison apple.

On the walk home she told Janey, 'Think I lost it last night.'

Janey looked at her side-on. 'You think?'

Rebecca nodded.

'If you had, you'd know.'

But she didn't know, which meant she still had it, and it wasn't lost.

She closes her eyes. There's a photograph of Kurt lying on his back, on hard tiles, dead. His right arm, a hand, a shoe, lace untied, a policeman squatting beside him.

With her front teeth, she picks at the last of the flesh around the apple core. What is it

with apples — the sex of apples? The ripeness, the juice, or maybe when cut in half they look like a vagina, like a heart.

Originally published online by Spelk Fiction, November 2018.

## Creation

Ever since he was told about a man who'd lost an arm starting up a cement mixer, Erik has hated the first job of the day. Even after Larry showed him an easier way, he hated doing it.

The sky is cloudy. They said the clouds should clear in time for the solar eclipse, due at 11am.

He grips the cement-mixer handle, takes a deep breath and turns. Nothing. He parts his legs, turns the handle slowly, then yanks it at the top of its rotation. Nothing. He stretches his back and takes a deep breath. When he turns the handle, he feels the cogs inside the mixer grind, the metal teeth interlacing. The engine hiccups. There's the smell of diesel, and after he gives it one last punch, the engine makes a slow phut phut noise and is away. He shovels in eight sand and two cement. He adds water before shovelling another eight sand and two cement, then more water and a squirt of washing up liquid. It smells of lemons.

Erik takes away the polythene covering the bricks, leans the hod against them, and fills it with twelve bricks. The ladder creaks when he steps onto the first rung. He walks across the scaffolding and swings his shoulders to catch the hod in both hands, the wooden pole swinging up beside his hip. In one jerk, he catches the bricks and drops them onto the scaffolding.

Walking along yesterday's brickwork, he takes down the hessian covering. Larry's technique, at times, appeared slow, disorganised, but the outcome was always the same: perfect brickwork.

He sets up Larry's spot, lays out his trowel and spirit level, then checks his watch. Larry's never late.

After stopping the mixer, Erik tidies the site, then has breakfast.

Yesterday, as Larry watched him lay three rows, Erik told him how, 'The sun is four hundred times bigger than the moon. But because of the distance of the moon and sun from the earth, it means they appear the exact same size. Which is why we see a total eclipse.'

Larry shook his head and smirked.

'Hasn't always been that way,' Erik went on, 'and won't always be that way. The moon has been moving away from the earth nearly four centimetres each year.'

Larry, cleaning his spirit level, said, 'What the hell are you doing here, kid? You shouldn't be asking me to teach you to lay bricks.'

Erik sits on the scaffolding to watch the eclipse. The sky is dark, and through the clouds, the sun, now a crescent, is a dull grey. It's close to a total eclipse, dark like midnight; no birds sing. The clouds come again. He checks his watch. The clouds part to reveal a black disk.

His phone vibrates. Message from Scott, the foreman: *Larry dead. No bricklayers. Take*

*day off. No pay.*

Erik stands, and runs his hand against the gable they'd started yesterday. He remembers how Larry spun the handle of the trowel in his hand, before digging into the compo. He'd cut it, lift it, slap it back again and work it until it's the perfect shape on his trowel. There'd be the shush of his trowel digging triangle shapes into the layer of compo on top of the brickwork, the scrape of his trowel catching the compo that spills over the sides. Then three taps, nudging the brick into place. Another scrape along its side and one more tap. When he'd laid half-a-dozen bricks, he'd rest the spirit level on top and lean in to check the bubble of mercury.

When he told Larry there wouldn't be a total eclipse for another ninety years, Larry looked at the backs of his hands and said, 'And there'll still be houses need building.'

The sky is brightening and the air is warmer.

Erik takes Larry's trowel, wets the compo and chooses a brick from the stack. He guesses twelve more rows to the top, spins the handle of Larry's trowel in the palm of his hand, and digs into the compo. Maybe these bricks, one beside the other, row upon row, will still be here when the next solar eclipse appears in the sky.

## Moon Feminism

The sun, in literature, is always male, the moon, female.

Twenty minutes until the solar eclipse. Rebecca glances at Matt beside her on the bed. She takes out her copy of DH Lawrence's short stories, curled yellow bits of paper sprouting out the top. The lecture that afternoon will be on the story 'Sun'.

'You read it?' she asks.

Matt shakes his head.

'A woman who, feeling unwell, is advised to spend time in the sun, in Italy. Each day she lies naked and offers herself to the sun. Lawrence uses blues and golds like a Van Gogh.'

In her rucksack is a baguette. She tears off a piece and eats it. It's stale.

'It is men themselves,' she continues, 'who have perpetuated the idea they are the sun: rising, fierce, powerful.'

Matt smiles at the bread in her hand.

'What is it with you and bread?'

She shrugs and covers her bag.

'And it is men who have continued to use the moon as a metaphor for women: changeable, glowing, of the night.'

He puts a hand on her leg and kisses her.

'The eclipse,' she says.

'We have time.'

She lets him undress her. His arms are feminine, thinner than her own. The tops of his chest and shoulders are flecked with golden hairs, the same colour as those on his head.

'You okay?' she asks.

'I've had girlfriends,' he says, like he's answering a different question.

Her sympathy means she'll have to go through with it.

As he kisses her neck and breasts, outside the sky is darkening. She will always remember this solar eclipse, where she was, who she was with and what she was doing.

The Italian peasant in Lawrence's story has an erection simply by looking at the naked woman on her terrace. But then, it was written by a man.

She moves him so she's sitting on his lap.

'Relax,' she says, and kisses him.

Outside it is silent.

Beneath her, Matt is thin and grey, his collarbone and ribs breaking through the skin. The window is dark blue, the sky charcoal.

'Do you want to watch it?' he says.

'Sure,' she says.

He frowns. 'I'm sorry.'

She moves off him and sits by the window.

'You have done it before?' she asks, moving the curtain, looking up at the sky.

'Have *you*?'

'Yes.'

When she turns her back, he's looking at his lap, hands covering his groin. There's semen streaked across his thighs and fingers.

'In Mandarin,' she says, 'the solar eclipse is "rishi". It refers to the sun being eaten by a dog in the sky. "Ri" means sun, and "Shi" means food.'

She reaches down, takes the long baguette from her bag and tears off a piece with her teeth. It'll be a long time before there is another total eclipse here. For now, the moon arcs across the sky, covers the sun and extinguishes the light.

## Millennium Moths

Erik smells the backs of his fingers: lavender and mint massage oil.

‘Your feet are pretty,’ he says, his fingers sliding over her instep, then heel.

‘Hate my feet.’ Gail lifts her leg and turns it. ‘I like my calves. But not my feet.’ She drops her leg and closes her eyes.

Erik massages her feet. On the TV is a documentary about bugs. The Atlas moth is one of the largest insects in the world. The females can have a wingspan of up to twelve inches.

‘I hate moths,’ Gail says. ‘Can’t we watch the fireworks?’

‘What do you have against moths?’

‘I want to watch the fireworks. It’s the millennium.’

On the TV, an Atlas moth emerges from a chrysalis, unfurling its massive wings.

‘Imagine a time when there was no artificial light,’ he says. ‘Before humans.’

She turns to face the TV. ‘They’re ugly,’ she says. ‘Not like butterflies.’

‘We’ve been making fire for what — three hundred thousand years? You’d have thought they’d be used to it by now. Would have evolved.’

‘The fireworks,’ she says, nodding at the TV.

He reaches for the remote control, his fingers sliding over the rubber buttons.

‘We don’t really know why moths do it,’ he says.

She rolls her eyes.

He changes the channel on the TV. Someone is singing. There’s a countdown in the top right hand corner: nine minutes to go.

‘Do you think there’ll be an actual millennium bug?’ she asks, her brow creased.

‘Maybe,’ he says. ‘No electricity, no computers, no lights. Civilisation as we know it will come to a standstill.’

She pulls away her feet and folds her legs close to her body. ‘Don’t say that. People will get hurt.’

‘It’ll be good for moths,’ he says.

‘I don’t care about moths.’

He turns his hands that glisten with massage oil and wonders whether moths, like us, are drawn to the bursting neon of fireworks.

‘I like her dress,’ Gail says to the TV.

‘At least she’ll look good when the world ends,’ he says.

He brings his hands closer to his face. The bones in his hands are the same, by design, as those in wings. That’s all wings are: hands. Or maybe it’s the other way around, that’s all hands are: wings.

## Rat

Rebecca, on the hotel balcony, turns quickly, the legs of the plastic chair scratching across the floor. Since their first day in Tenerife, after seeing a rat slither up and out of the bin at the rear of the hotel, she is startled by any sudden movement. Paddling in the sea that morning, she winced at the sand between her toes, at tiny fish bumping her shins, at a thread of seaweed wrapped around her ankle.

From the balcony, the sea makes a rushing sound like the motorway back home, three streets away.

David is on the bed, naked, spread-eagled, his body aimed at the fan on the ceiling.

He'd pointed at the rat as it fell out of the huge metal bin. 'Look. It's huge.'

And it was. It was only there for a moment, but Rebecca was left with the impression of its fat body, long tail, skittering legs.

She'd held onto David, who laughed. 'You know,' he said, 'at any one time, you're never more than six feet from a rat.'

'Is that true?' she'd asked, scanning the floor.

Maybe there is a rat climbing the cream walls of the hotel.

For three days after the rat sighting, David joked about it, making her jump several times. On the fourth night, when he told her there was a rat in the restaurant, next to her feet, she lost her temper. 'Fuck off, David!'

She stands over him, the fan above shuffling. She could wake him to apologise, to talk to him about rats and how scared she is. The hairs on his chest, stomach and groin, shiver beneath the fan. How can he lie there, naked, his penis limp against his thigh, and a rat only six feet away?

At the wedding, both David's mother and father spoke to her.

'He's my boy,' his mother said between sips of champagne. 'You will make him happy, won't you?'

His father, also holding a flute of champagne, said, 'Look after my boy. Know what I mean? Make him happy.'

She sits on the bed, ready to wake David and make things right. But in his sleep, his expression shifts. There is that smile, like a child's, the one she'd seen when he'd joked about there being a rat nearby.

To both his mother and father, she'd said the same thing: 'I love him. I'm going to do all I can to make him happy.'

There might be a rat appear from the dark space behind the headboard. It might climb up onto the bed, forage in the folds of the sheets, and bite David's penis.

Six days. She's been a wife for six days.

## Pterodactyl

Erik sits on the carpet next to Jack, who opens the box and tips out the dinosaur cards.

‘Turn them over, Daddy,’ Jack says.

‘Hey, squirt,’ he says. ‘No cheating.’

‘Just looking.’

‘I know what you’re up to.’

‘Me first,’ Jack says.

Erik crosses his legs, his socked feet massive next to Jack’s.

‘Go on then,’ Erik says, ‘you first.’

Gail is in the kitchen, holding a glass of wine in both hands, her eyes red.

Jack turns over a stegosaurus, and then another.

‘Well done. A pair.’

‘Other go,’ Jack says. He moves onto his knees and turns over a diplodocus.

‘Take your time.’

Jack dives for a card and turns over a brontosaurus.

‘Wrong,’ Jack says. ‘Your go, Daddy.’

Erik turns over the same diplodocus.

‘Now then. Where could it be?’

‘I know. I know.’

‘Don’t tell me.’

Erik turns over a velociraptor.

Jack jumps on his knees and laughs. ‘No! I know, I know.’ He turns over the same diplodocus, and almost at the same time, turns over its matching card.

Gail walks into the living room. When Erik makes eye contact with her, she shakes her head.

‘I need to tell you something,’ he says to Jack.

‘My go,’ Jack says, turning over a pterodactyl and a brontosaurus. ‘Now you, Daddy.’

‘Need to tell you something.’

Jack scans the cards.

Erik swallows. ‘Daddy isn’t going to be living here from now on.’

Gail drinks from her glass.

‘Jack. Did you hear me?’

‘Where will you sleep?’

‘I’m going to sleep at Nanny Dianne’s.’

‘Can I have a sleepover?’

‘Sure you can. And when I get a place, a real place, you can have sleepovers all the time.’

Jack looks to his mum, then back to Erik.

‘Is mummy having a sleepover too?’

Gail's eyes are on Erik.

'Mummy will sleep here. Like normal.'

'And you will sleep at Nanny's?'

'For now.'

Jack moves from his knees and sits cross-legged like Erik.

'Your go,' Jack says.

Erik inhales and turns over a brontosaurus. He waits, watches Jack's shoulders fall forwards, then turns over a triceratops.

Jack turns over two cards at the same time. An iguanodon and pterodactyl. He stares at the cards.

'Buddy?' Erik says.

Jack stands and falls into him, wrapping his arms around his neck. He smells both sour and sweet, of biscuits and sleep. Erik presses his hand against Jack's back. There's the jumble of himself and Gail in the colour and smell of his skin and hair.

Jack lets go and runs to Gail.

Erik's throat closes. The cards shimmer against the carpet. He played a game as a child — the sort of game that predicts the future. Like now. If he chooses a pair, then he'll leave. If not, he'll stay. He turns over a pterodactyl. He's seen its pair. Somewhere.

Jack is crying.

Dinosaur: terrible lizard. Huge tail, teeth and claws.

Its pair is here somewhere. He's seen it.

The pipes in the wall clank the way they always have. They've kept him company late at night, in bed, as he stared at the ceiling.

He turns over a second card. A pterodactyl.

## The Masculinity in Cars

The taxi clips the hedgerow and branches rattle against the window. Rebecca holds onto David's arm.

'Should have gone left a while back,' David whispers to her.

A voice on the taxi driver's radio says something she can't make out.

'Excuse me,' David says, leaning forwards. 'Do you know the way?'

The driver pulls into a lay-by along the country lane.

'David,' she whispers. 'I'm scared.'

'Excuse me,' David says, louder this time. 'Are we lost?'

'Quicker,' the taxi driver says, and types something into his phone.

There are no streetlights on the road, only fields either side.

The taxi driver laughs at something said on the radio. The car pulls off, the front wheels skidding.

David sits forward. 'You sure you know where we're going?'

The driver lifts a hand and waves him away.

'He's driving too fast,' Rebecca says.

They drive through country lanes, the car weaving, powerful, masculine.

David's jaw flexes, his eyes wide, his fingers red where they grip the passenger seat.

Just as she's about to speak to the driver, she recognises the pattern of streetlights up ahead.

'Clover Drive,' David says. 'There.' He points to a turning.

The taxi driver mutters something.

'Stop,' Rebecca snaps. 'Here.'

She opens the door before the taxi comes to a complete stop. Outside the taxi she breathes heavily, a hand on her chest. As David gets out of the car, the driver smiles and winks at her.

David puts his arm around Rebecca's shoulders. 'Crazy,' he says.

The taxi pulls away and speeds along the road.

Holding hands, in silence, they walk to the front door. David takes the key from his pocket.

'What the hell happened?' he says. 'What an arsehole.'

She tries to smile. 'I thought we were being abducted or something.'

In bed they kiss and hold one another

'I'm not sure what happened,' he says.

She shushes him, moves down the bed and puts him in her mouth. But it's no good; his heart is beating too quickly. She moves up the bed and kisses him.

'That fucking idiot,' David says. 'Should have put my fist through his face.'

Rebecca strokes his chest and kisses his forehead. She lies next to him and shivers.

'I'm sorry,' he says, glancing down the bed.

Her skin is goose-pimpled and hairs rise along her forearms. The whole time they've lived there, David has tried and failed to set the timer on the central heating so it comes on when needed.

'Are you cold?' he asks. 'Shall I take a look at the heating?'

'No,' she says, and reaches for more duvet. 'It's fine. Stay here.'

She feels his ribcage thrumming. Lifetimes ago, she and David lay together in a cave, unable to keep a fire burning, while outside other men hunted animals for meat, for their pelt, or to keep the village safe.

# Tyrannosaurus

When Jack closes the car door, Erik takes the aftershave from the glovebox, sprays once on his neck and once inside Jack's rucksack.

Jack stands on tip-toe and uses his plastic T. rex to ring the bell. Erik had painted the door the day after they'd moved in. He wanted 'Baked Cherry Red' but Gail got her way with 'Cottage Garden Green'.

'Missed you, squirt,' Gail says, and lifts Jack to kiss him.

Jack squeezes her neck, then wriggles free and runs into the house.

'You said ten,' Gail says to Erik.

Inside the house he hears muffled talk between Jack and Simon.

'He insisted on pancakes.' Erik hands her the rucksack.

'You don't have to give him what he wants.'

'I do if I want to get out of the house.'

Gail opens the rucksack, shakes her head at the tangle of trousers, jumper and jacket.

'He packed it himself,' Erik says.

'I can see that.'

From inside, Scott hears Jack showing Simon his dinosaur.

'Can I see him in the week?' Erik asks.

Gail shakes her head. 'Next Saturday. We agreed.'

'For a couple of hours?'

'Next Saturday,' she says, and places the rucksack on the table in the hall.

Jack runs into the back of Gail's legs. 'Simon says the T. rex had feathers.'

'Feathers?' Erik says. 'No, buddy. It's a dinosaur. It's T. rex.'

Jack scrunches his face and runs back into the house.

Gail folds her arms. 'Don't forget parents' evening next Tuesday.'

Erik takes the car keys from his pocket. 'I won't.' He turns to leave.

'Erik,' she says, her voice different. Gail steps out of the house, pulls the door to and arranges her hair. 'That aftershave.' She glances back to the house. 'Can you not wear it when you drop him off?'

'Aftershave?'

'It's just ... it stays on Jack. Stays with me.' She transfers her weight from one leg to the other. 'It's difficult enough.'

Erik touches the top button on his shirt.

'I know what you're doing,' she says. 'But this was your choice, remember. I told you.'

In the room that used to be their bedroom, the curtains have been replaced with vertical blinds.

'Pick him up Wednesday,' she says. 'From school. But be back by six.' She pushes open the front door and steps up into the house.

Simon appears next to her, his arms crossed. Jack stands next to Gail. The three of

them, together.

Erik starts the car, takes the aftershave from the passenger seat, and throws it in the glovebox.

Only Jack is left at the door, waving.

A bird swoops down onto the road and Erik has a vague memory of being told once before how dinosaurs were birds.

Jack closes the door.

Gail was right — ‘Cottage Garden Green’ — she was right.

## Contact Less

Reaching with a blind hand, Rebecca pulls a loaf from the back row and reads its tiny scarf. David buys the wrong sort; he buys bleached, ghost-bread, even though he knows she doesn't like it. The price of bread is an economic barometer. There's a trick to selling a house: bread in the oven. She sniffs the loaf. Bread is as old as farming, as old as the domesticated dog. She wants a dog. David doesn't. In the UK, six million loaves are thrown into our waterways each year. This disrupts the whole ecosystem and is bad news for amphibians, fish and ducks. Bread is wrapped in plastic. She watched a TV programme about the Pacific Trash Vortex. There was a time the baker would take a loaf from the shelf and hand it over, dusting the counter in flour. No plastic. Her nan had a breadboard, breadknife and a square yellow gingham towel to cover the bread. Only self-checkouts these days. Less contact. Next to the self-checkout machine are three loaves, white, the ones David buys, each with a sticker: 'Still Fresh'. She hovers the barcode over the glass. Beep. Contactless. She hovers the card above the machine. Plastic hovering above plastic, a sliver of space between, like reiki, hovering hands, ch'i. Contactless. She moves the card closer, narrowing the space, and she can't remember the last time David kissed her, or the last time he went down on her, or the last time they did that thing with their hands, interlacing fingers so it looks like a zip on a coat. Beep. She swaps the loaf for one that is 'Still Fresh', and walks out of the shop, the loaf expiring with every second, held close to her chest.

Originally published online by X-Ray Magazine, December 2018.

## Nylon and Silk

Erik waits at the bar, half sat on a stool, and finishes his lager before asking the barman for another. The door opens. It's not Gail. Four women, laughing, walk to the bar. One of them meets his eye, then looks away.

The door opens again and this time it's Gail.

A man at the other end of the bar watches Gail too. She's thinner, her hair shorter, and she moves differently. She doesn't acknowledge him; she stands at the bar and takes out her purse.

'Hi,' she says to the barman.

She orders a tonic water and watches the barman pour it.

Erik's not seen the red dress before and she smells different.

'You look good,' he says.

She nods and looks in her purse.

He says, 'Simon know you're here?'

'Thank you,' she says to the barman, handing him money. She takes a long drink and sits on the stool beside Erik's.

'Thanks for coming,' he says.

'You made it sound important.'

'How are you?'

'I'm fine.'

'How's Jack?'

'He's fine.'

He takes a long drink.

'I made a mistake,' he says.

Gail sniggers into her glass. 'A mistake?'

'When I see you with him — when I see you, and Jack, with him ...'

She crosses her legs and arranges her dress.

He stares at her black, nylon-covered legs. He'd bought her silk ones years ago, but she said she preferred nylon.

'You're jealous. That's all.' She turns on the stool and scans the bar.

'It's not that.'

'And what? I tell Simon it's over, because you made a *mistake*?'

'I miss you. I miss living with you and Jack.'

He watches her drink, the glass against her lips.

'You're a piece of work, Erik. You know that?'

'Is he bigger than me?'

Her brow furrows and she looks from one of his eyes to the other. She can't hide a smile.

'What?' she asks.

'Is he?'

She shakes her head.

'Have a glass of wine,' he says.

'You know I can't.'

'How long's it been?'

'Six months sober. Simon has really helped.'

He drinks from his glass.

'That's great. Well done.'

She looks into her glass, traces a finger around the rim.

'We're finished,' she says. 'Simon and me.'

'When?'

'Just over a week ago.'

'Jack hasn't said.'

'Haven't told him. He likes Simon.'

Erik rolls his shoulders and stretches his back. Her legs uncross and cross again. Her tights are laddered just above the knee.

'You're not with anyone?' she asks.

'No.'

She arranges her dress, covering the laddered thigh.

One of the women at the bar asks the barman if he has a girlfriend and the women next to her laugh. The woman who met Erik's eye when she came in smiles at him.

'You're bigger,' Gail says, her eyes heavy, her mouth downturned, her shoulders falling forwards. She puts a hand on his knee.

As Erik strokes Gail's shoulder, he glances at the woman at the bar, at the pristine mat sheen of silk covering her legs.

# Thunder

Rebecca glances out of the kitchen window to see Karl look up at the sky. A woman crouches to speak with him and points at a plastic toy house in which other children are playing. There is the sound of thunder. The children, except Karl, scream.

‘It’s for sale,’ says a woman in a long green dress.

Rebecca scans the kitchen. ‘It’s lovely.’

‘Mahogany,’ another woman says. She lifts her sunglasses onto her forehead and runs a hand along the kitchen worktop.

The woman in the green dress leans into Rebecca. ‘He’s a surgeon.’

Rebecca drinks from her wine glass and tries to remember their names. When David told her about the playdate, she’d said she didn’t want to go.

‘You should go,’ he said. ‘Karl needs to make friends before he goes to school. Making friends is important.’

His words were aimed more at her than Karl.

The woman in the green dress points at Rebecca’s shoes.

‘You wore a lovely pair of heels the last time you were here. What were those? I said to Tracy how lovely they were.’

Rebecca glances down at her pumps. ‘Nothing special. Just an old pair.’

She checks on Karl through the window. He’s arguing with a girl. Rebecca places her wine glass on the worktop.

‘Excuse me.’

She carries Karl into the garage, next to the kitchen.

‘What did I tell you?’

‘It was her,’ he says.

‘You won’t make friends if you don’t play nicely.’

Karl points at a huge fish tank on the other side of the pool table, next to a rack of pool cues. ‘What’s that?’

She sighs as he runs around the pool table to point at each tiny neon fish in turn.

‘Can we have fish?’

She follows him. The fish swim one way then the other, their change in direction communicated between them somehow.

‘And who would take care of them?’

‘Me.’

She strokes the curls at the back of his head.

The strip light in the garage flickers and there’s more thunder.

‘Thunder,’ Karl says and runs outside.

Rebecca walks towards the door to the kitchen and hears the two women talking.

‘... she left small crescent-shaped marks all over the wooden floor.’

‘Oh my God.’

‘Geraldine says she distinctly remembers asking everyone to take off their shoes when they came through the front door. No one wore shoes. Except her. You remember?’

Rebecca looks at her shoes. It was the party, two weeks earlier. David insisted they go. She didn’t want to take off her shoes. There were women in bare feet, men in socks.

‘The new floor was ruined. Geraldine was livid.’

‘I bet.’

Heat moves across her shoulders and chest. Her throat tightens. She takes a deep breath and opens the kitchen door. The two women look at her, then at each other. Rebecca lifts her wine glass and finishes it. There is a red wine crescent stain on the worktop. She pulls a paper towel from the roll and wipes the stain, but can’t remove it. She takes another deep breath and walks outside.

On the lawn, Karl stares at the sky.

There is more thunder, a loud crack.

The women and children move quickly, shouting to one another to take things inside.

Rebecca sits on the garden bench and Karl sits on her lap.

‘I like thunder and lightning, mummy.’

She waits for the next flash. Inside the clouds is a pulse of silver.

‘Count,’ she tells Karl.

He counts out loud.

More thunder.

‘... Nine,’ Karl says.

‘There are two sorts of people in this world, Karl: those who love thunder and lightning, and those who don’t. Try to make friends with those who do.’

‘Daddy hates thunder and lightning.’

She places a hand on his back, feels his warmth, his small rib cage swell and contract, the pattering of heartbeats, the same excitement in him, as in herself, as in the sky.

Originally published online by Fictive Dream, December 2018.

## The Company of Men

The best man didn't have sex with a prostitute in the back of a van because the driver watched the whole time and he couldn't get it up. In the strip club, one of the stag party tries it on with one of the dancers and they're told to leave. On the pavement outside is a mobile phone. It rings. Erik meets the man to give back his phone but the man says Erik stole it. There's pushing and then they are in a night club. The next morning Erik wakes early to visit the Van Gogh exhibition at the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts. A Hungarian policeman with one hand resting on his gun watches Erik put a handful of Forints in the donation box. Erik stands in front of *Iris*es for ten minutes, his eyes moving between blues and golds. On the way back to the hotel the taxi driver asks: *you need pretty woman?* When he says no, the driver rips him off. When it's time to go home, they all meet by the coach. On the coach, three men are smoking and the coach driver shouts at them to get off. Two boys ride past on bikes and grab a bag each from beneath the coach and ride off. Erik gets off the coach, finds his bag and flags a taxi to the airport. Seeing the gold box of cigarettes, the taxi driver asks: *Benson and Hedges my friend? You Benson and Hedges?* Erik hands the driver a lit cigarette. *You like 'Lambada?'* the taxi driver asks, pulling up at the lights. He leans over to open the glovebox. He unravels a blue velvet purse, takes out a yellow cassette, and pushes it into the stereo. Cars all around sound their horns. The taxi driver pulls away and the 'Lambada' begins, loud on the stereo. The car sways left and right along the four-lane road. *English like 'Lambada'*, he shouts over the music. The taxi driver sings along to the tune. At the airport most of the stag party are already in the bar. Three policemen come onto the aeroplane and talk with a stewardess. The policemen take away four men, including the best man. *Let's all get off the fucking plane*, the best man says. Some follow but Erik fastens his seatbelt. On the aeroplane, waiting to take off, he's about to turn off his phone when he sees a message from Gail: *How was the Van Gogh exhibition? I missed you. See you when you land.* The aeroplane accelerates down the runway, its engines roaring, its wings outstretched, its nose lifting. He is done with the company of men. The aeroplane rises through the clouds; the sky is blue and gold like a Van Gogh.

## Making Babies

Rebecca stares at the man standing next to David on the lawn because he is beautiful. He's wearing huge brown boots and a bright green sleeveless jacket that has the words 'Oak Construction' embroidered on it. David and the man in huge boots look back at the house.

'We're thinking of having another,' David says, pointing at Rebecca's stomach.

She breathes in and closes her eyes.

David puts his hands in his trouser pockets and nods at the roof above the kitchen.

'So we're going to need another bedroom, Erik.'

David's voice changes when he's around other men.

'Now's the time to do it,' Erik says.

'That's what I figured.'

Erik takes two steps backwards and gestures to the roof.

'There's not much to it,' Erik says. 'We might even be able to use the same tiles, maybe use the same roof in its entirety. Lift it, build, put it back on.'

David shows Erik into the house.

Rebecca makes tea and tidies away Karl's toys. Another hour before she picks him up.

Upstairs, David and Erik are in her bedroom. She can't remember what night-clothes are on the back of the door, or whether there's dirty laundry beside the bed.

She hears them coming down the stairs.

Rebecca hands them cups of tea.

'Thank you,' Erik says.

David takes his tea out into the garden.

Erik is tall and fills the kitchen.

'Could do with an extension on this kitchen,' she says, and walks backwards into the washing machine that is rumbling through its last cycle.

'I can do that,' he says, and sips his tea.

The mug is tiny in his hands. His boots are thick-soled, wide, the leather tops folded over, loose, strapped with long laces.

'Looks good,' Erik says, nodding at a cake in the shape of a number six on the kitchen table.

'Karl, my son. It's his birthday tomorrow.'

'You make it?'

She's about to tell him how she's always made them, because of her mum, when David shouts from the garden.

'When could you start, do you think?'

'Thanks for the tea,' Erik says, and places the mug in the sink. He walks out into the garden.

Rebecca watches him through the kitchen window, feels a heat rise up from her collarbone to the top of her head.

Sitting up in bed, Rebecca brushes her hair.

David, in the bathroom, says, 'I'm not sure we need to start the extension yet.'

'Thought that's what you wanted?'

She stares at the blister-pack of pills on the table next to the bed.

'There's no rush,' David says. 'And I'm not sure about him. About Erik.'

Her brush stops.

'He seems to know what he's talking about,' she says.

David walks into the room and gets into bed. 'You think so?'

'I thought you wanted to start trying?'

His eyes narrow, and scan the length of her beneath the duvet.

She turns off the light without taking her pill. She can't remember the last time she's imagined being with another man. In the dark, she watches their shadows moving on the wall, and he's there, in the room, beside the bed, in that green jacket and in those boots, watching. She can take the pill later, when David's asleep.

## Pilomotor Reflex

When Erik gets into bed, Gail's skin is goose-pimpled.

'When was the last time we did this in the day?' she asks.

He motions for her to move on top of him, then wraps the duvet over her shoulders, a soapy, floral scent wafting up from beneath.

'What's got into you?' she asks.

He holds her waist, the ends of his thumbs stroking the wings of her hips. Her chest rises and falls.

'I'm going to tell Rebecca I'll get someone to finish her extension,' he says.

She tilts her head. 'Aren't you nearly done?'

'I'll get Jez to finish off,' he says.

'Not like you — not finishing a job.'

He shrugs, rests his hands on her thighs.

'I want to spend more time on the house,' he says. 'Our house.'

She leans over and kisses him. 'You and that house. It's too much for just you.'

He pulls her close, wraps an arm around her back, tucks her head between his shoulder and chin, and inhales her hair, skin and breath.

'Goose-pimples,' he says into her neck, 'are the body's way of keeping warm. From when our bodies were covered in hair. Muscles around the hair follicles contract, making the hairs stand on end, creating a layer of warm air.'

'Where'd you hear that?'

This is all there is — this should be all there needs to be — only Gail, in a room, in a bed, beneath a duvet.

'You need to warm me up then,' she says.

Through loose strands of her hair he sees light cut through the window. Outside a car drives past and the curtain billows into the room. Rebecca, wherever she is, might feel a breeze too. There are other times, Rebecca told him, when her skin goose-pimples. It's called the pilomotor reflex. These other times, such as when her neck is kissed, or her skin stroked lightly, is the misfiring of some ancient survival mechanism that is of no use to us any more.

He kisses Gail's neck and waits for the misfiring, but nothing happens.

## Dinosaur in the Wall

There is a dinosaur in the wall.

Rebecca sits on the floorboards, folds her naked legs by her side, pulls the cord of her dressing gown tighter, and leans in, an ear pressed against the wall. There's the muffled sound of Karl's cartoons on the TV downstairs, of David in the kitchen making dinner. Beneath this is the gentle shush of the wall, of plaster, of timber and brick. The plaster is not completely dry in places, laid out like an atlas with its continents, seas and islands.

She wipes the wall with the palm of her hand. Behind it is a Tyrannosaurus rex.

Erik had taken care of everything: the brickwork, the carpentry, even the plumbing. And she had been there for all of it, each morning waiting for him.

It became a room, a bedroom, when he laid the floor. He ran the floorboards in the opposite direction to the floor joists and spent all day hammering.

The next day, Erik carried plasterboard through the house, up the stairs and into the new bedroom. He laid the boards on the new floor, one on top of the other. In the afternoon he measured and cut them.

At the end of the day, she found him holding a toy plastic dinosaur.

'Karl won't miss it, will he?' Erik asked, standing it on one of the timber struts inside the wall.

She shook her head. 'He has hundreds.'

'I like to leave something in the wall.'

She was there when he nailed up the plasterboard.

'Make a wish,' he said, and covered the dinosaur.

'Really?'

He waited for her to close her eyes before hammering in the nails.

She made a wish.

When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her stomach.

'No,' she said. 'I'm not.'

'Was the plan, wasn't it? Another baby?'

The room was white beneath the naked lightbulb, and again, he glanced at her belly.

She stared at him, her lips shaping and re-shaping different words. 'David's plan,' she said. 'Not mine.'

Erik collected his tools into a cloth bag.

She could have shown him the box of pills hidden in her bedroom, shown him the burst foil coverings.

'That's me done,' he said. 'Jez will be here from Monday to finish off.'

He put on his jacket and left.

She unfolds her legs and rises to her knees.

He'd waited, hammer in hand, for her to make her wish. It was a girl's wish. *Kiss me*. Over and over, her eyes closed. *Kiss me*. He hammered the nails into the wall, behind which a toy dinosaur stood alone and in the dark.

## Little Dinosaur

She is a little dinosaur, lying on the mattress, asleep. Erik drops to his haunches, next to the mattress laid out on the floor. Rebecca lies on her side, half-mooned, a sheet covering her waist and legs. Her back is curved. The bumps of her spine roll up from beneath the sheet, up to her neck, where her hair fans out across the pillow. He counts the bumps of her spine, each one more pronounced as they rise up her back, until they combine in one ridge of bone at the base of her neck. Her skeleton, her bones, are rolled out on the mattress. Her shoulder blade is round, contoured, mirrors the shape of her hip bone. She breathes slowly in her sleep. He leans over and kisses the skin between her shoulder blades.

‘I fell asleep,’ she whispers.

He lifts the sheet and lies behind her. He strokes her shoulder and traces the length of her spine, making her shiver.

‘Your spine is beautiful.’

‘My spine?’

‘Like a little dinosaur’s.’

‘A dinosaur? Is that a good thing?’

He kisses her shoulder and listens to the distant hum of an aeroplane passing overhead.

Her leg twitches against his; she’s asleep again. He rests his nose in her hair, closes his eyes and doesn’t ever want to move. They’ll be found there, in a hundred million years, their skeletons, along with their combined impressions in the mattress, preserved in stone as fossils. Whoever uses brushes and scalpels to uncover them will find it impossible to separate one skeleton from the other.

‘I have to go,’ she says. ‘David will be home soon.’

When she sits up and reaches for her clothes, the bumps along her spine move beneath her skin. She pulls a red sweater over her head and his little dinosaur is gone; she is a woman.

## The Mating Ritual of Wood Pigeons

Rebecca reads, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* out loud — the passage that describes the man and woman having sex in the heather.

She reaches for the bedsheet, pulls it over her legs, then chest. The mattress is laid out on bare floorboards, next to a small window. In one corner of the room is Erik's cloth bag filled with tools next to bags of plaster, bags of nails and screws, and tubs of paint. The window is open.

'Did thee feel the earth move?' Erik asks, mimicking Hemingway.

'It did. One could have fallen off,' she says.

Erik lies naked on his front across the mattress, at her feet.

'All thees and thous,' he says. 'Like the bible.'

Outside, on the fence, are two wood pigeons. The male bows and fans its tail feathers, then edges towards the female who hops along the fence in the opposite direction. The male calls, over and over, cooing.

'It never moves more than three times in a lifetime,' she says, reading from the book.

'Is that true?'

She shrugs and kisses him on the cheek. Outside, the male wood pigeon takes off; the female stays on the fence.

'You are my third,' he says.

She glances at him, then away again.

'You're jealous,' he says, stroking her leg through the bedsheet.

'I loved David once.'

The air in the room is still and warm. Outside there's the sound of wings clapping.

'So two?' he asks.

She nods, her attention on the book.

'It means you'll have to do this again. For me it's you. From now on, just you.'

'It's only a book,' she says.

He turns away and lies on his back, his arms stretched up over his head, the backs of his hands resting on the floorboards.

'I'm going to finish this house for you,' he says. 'For us.'

She takes a deep breath.

'I'm going to tell Gail tomorrow.'

They listen to the wood pigeon, calling.

'They mate for life,' he says. 'Wood pigeons.'

She stares at the book, her eyes not moving.

He asks, 'Does it move when he makes love to you?'

She turns the page.

'Sorry,' he says.

Outside there is the clattering of wings. Against the blue sky, the male wood pigeon flies

upwards, before it tilts and falls. It claps its wings and rises again, its tail feathers spread wide. It lands on the fence beside the female. It calls, ruffles its feathers and bows to his one and only mate.

## Thirteen Point Eight Billion Years

As he waits for the lights to change, Erik sends Rebecca a message: It's done. I've left her.

He drops the phone into the ashtray, flicks on the window wipers, and turns up the volume on the stereo. The Doors: 'Love Her Madly'. He taps the steering wheel in time with the beat and checks the car in front before reaching for his phone. No response.

Three boys ride past on bikes, travelling in the opposite direction. When he was their age, he threaded wooden ice lolly sticks through the brake callipers so they caught in the spokes of the wheel; this made the sound of a motorbike. He wrote things on the sticks, like the age of the universe.

His phone rings. It's Gail's phone.

He puts it on speaker.

'Dad?' Jack asks, panicked.

'You okay?'

'Mum's in the bath and I think there's something wrong.'

'Wrong?'

'I'm calling her, but she's not answering.'

When he told her he was leaving, she didn't cry.

'Listen, Jack. I need you to go in and take out the bath plug.'

The last time he left her, he found her lying in water, asleep, a bottle of vodka beside her.

'But she's in the bath,' Jack says down the phone.

'She's asleep and won't know. Go into the bathroom and take out the plug. Go and do it now.'

'But ...'

'Jack,' Erik says, 'I need you to do what I tell you.'

There's shuffling and movement on the phone.

'I'm doing it. She's asleep.'

'When the water drains, put towels over her. I'm on my way.'

He turns the car around and catches up with the boys riding bikes. When he stops at the lights, the rain tapping against the roof of the car makes the same sound as the ticking of an ice lolly stick in the spokes of a bike wheel. When he wrote the age of the universe on the ice lolly stick, he counted the zeros to make sure it was accurate.

His phone vibrates. A message from Rebecca: I love you. When can we meet?

He doesn't respond, because of Jack, because Gail is lying still beneath bath water, her skin grey.

When he was a boy, the age of the universe was mostly zeros. With each zero, he added another hundred, thousand, million, billion years, and his comprehension lessened. He closes his eyes and the zeros appear one at a time on the ice lolly stick, each one a void that takes him further and further away from the beginning of everything.

## Three Per Cent of Mammals

This road is haunted. Every other day, traffic queues next to a smoking car, a lorry that's shed its load, or five-car pile-up.

Rebecca checks her rear-view. On the back seat Karl looks out of his window. Maybe there'll be the underside of a car, its wheels spinning, flames poking up through the mechanics, bodies sprawled across the tarmac.

David insisted she have a silver car. Silver cars are the safest.

Last night, within an hour of telling him, David had packed what he needed and left.

The road is wet and the cars ahead crawl by the accident.

She checks her phone. Still no message from Erik; he promised he'd text once he'd told her.

Her stomach turns, her chest tightens and heat rises around her throat.

From outside, there's a sweet chemical smell. A policeman, fluorescent-jacketed, stern faced, waves at the cars to keep moving. Two other policemen and two paramedics stand next to one of the cars that is smashed in, overturned. Next to the ambulance is a woman, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, who meets Rebecca's eyes; she half-smiles and nods at Rebecca, who nods in return. There's something familiar in the way the woman looks back at her, as though, if their days had been only slightly different, they could easily swap places.

Her phone vibrates. Erik: It's done. I've left her.

She replies: I love you. When can we meet?

The paramedic closes the ambulance doors with the woman inside, and climbs into the front. With a burst of siren, the vehicle pulls into the traffic.

'They going to be okay?' Karl asks.

'I hope so.'

'Looks like Dad's car.'

'It's not,' she says.

'Was just saying. The same car.'

If it was David in the overturned car she wouldn't have to deal with what she's done. The overturned car is in the rear-view; the car is silver.

She'd surrendered her routine, the functioning of it all — the mornings, the days, the nights. It's a Friday. Later, they'd have had fish and chips. She'd have put Karl to bed and read to him. She and David would have watched TV and shared a bottle of wine. They'd have gone to bed and he'd have talked about Karl having a sister.

The cars on the dual carriageway make way for the ambulance, a parade of red lights moving left and right, until there's a narrow pathway through the centre.

In the car next to them is a dog.

On the doorstep, before he left, David spoke quietly about mammals — how only three per cent are monogamous: wolves, beavers and some species of bat.

## Seven Hundred Million Breaths

Erik can feel through the mattress, Gail's heart beating. She always sleeps on her front, one arm beneath the pillow, the other reaching for him, a hand on his hip bone. She breathes deeply and her ribs swell, then contract.

Rebecca's last message on his phone, now six months old, reads: Goodbye.

He selects 'delete contact' and his phone asks if he is sure. He cancels the request.

The young couple on the other side of the wall are getting ready for bed. The man works in a bank; the woman owns her own nail salon.

Erik can't make out words, but listens to the cadence of their talk; sometimes he hears himself with Rebecca, in another time and place. The rise and fall of their talk is gentle, playful. Sound moves differently in the dark. He closes his eyes, and in the softer half of their talk, Rebecca speaks to him, asking how many breaths someone takes in a lifetime. Using the digital clock, he counts seventeen breaths in a minute.

He moves closer to Gail. Many times she's asked him to hold her while they sleep. But some people, he explained, are solitary sleepers, unable to share their sleep in that way.

Sixty minutes in an hour.

Within seconds, Gail is asleep, her breathing slow and deep.

Twenty-four hours in a day.

Next door, the bed creaks and there's the wet-snap of kissing. They don't have sex on Tuesdays.

Three hundred and sixty-five days in a year.

It is too warm. He turns away from Gail to lie on his side; this is the only way he can sleep. Foolish to think, next door, he and Rebecca are holding one another.

Average life expectancy is around eighty years.

There is the acoustics of three inhalations and exhalations of other people, one beside him and two on the other side of the wall.

He grabs his phone. He wants to tell Rebecca she'll take seven hundred million breaths in a lifetime. He's always been good at sums.

His last message to Rebecca was: I'm sorry.

He selects: 'delete contact' and it asks if he is sure. This time he is.

There was a time, when he was younger, in order to sleep, he'd concentrate on his breathing. He was in control of each inhalation and exhalation, so much so, he couldn't turn his attention away from it, scared if he did, he might stop breathing altogether.

## Now He is Gone

Not spring, not treetops, not mountains, not fireworks, not lakes, not guitars, not rain on glass, not London, not snow, not Hemingway, not thunder, not birds, not silk, not birthdays or Christmas or New Year, not REM, not Rioja, not piano with violins, not mornings or afternoons or nights, not pasta, not the sea, not cats, not waves, not letters, not yawning, not *Lost in Translation*, not running, not chocolate, not yesterday or today or tomorrow, not Rothko, not toast, not candles, not train stations, not lips or tongues or teeth, not bread, not shadows, not shins or thighs or arms or fingers, not winter, not collarbones or shoulder blades, not apples, not smiling, not body language, not whispers, not skin, not kissing, not sex, not the sky or the moon or the sun or the stars, not poetry, not winged seeds falling from sycamore trees, not rhyme, not beauty, not love, not story ... only this, whatever this is, now he is gone.

## Side B

Erik is forgiven; and yet he and Gail are outside, sitting at a table in the snow. His eyes move through their reflection in the floor-to-ceiling window of the restaurant, to a woman walking beside the canal. It's Rebecca. Only it isn't. It's been two years and still he sees her everywhere. The woman enters the restaurant with two other women and shimmies snow from her coat.

Gail says, 'Ask him again.' She shudders. 'I'm cold.'

'You look good,' he says. 'The dress.'

She glances down, then takes a long drink from her wine glass.

He unfastens his jacket. 'Take this if you're cold.'

'I'm fine.'

He closes his jacket.

The waiter appears at their table and takes the half-finished soup bowls.

'Everything to your satisfaction?'

Erik could answer truthfully: how the soup was lukewarm, or how cold it is next to the window, or why he's with Gail because of Jack and because he's scared of what she might do if he leaves her again.

'The table?' Erik asks.

'I'm sorry,' the waiter says. 'We really did not expect to be this busy. With the weather and all. If there is a cancellation I will let you know.'

The waiter takes away their bowls.

'Had a message today,' Gail says. 'From the school. Jack misbehaving again. You need to talk to him. Properly. He doesn't listen to me.'

'He's a teenage boy. It's what they do.'

She closes her eyes and sits back in her chair.

'I'll talk to him,' he says.

'He's going to mess up his exams.'

Again, he's drawn to their reflection. Every now and then snowflakes rub against the glass.

'You look handsome,' she says, lifting her glass. 'Happy birthday. Life begins at forty and all that.'

Erik lifts his glass.

'I got you something.' She takes a large, flat, square present from her rucksack.

He unwraps it.

Gail leans across the table.

'You said you wanted to start collecting again. After your mum ...'

A vinyl LP: *Morrison Hotel* by The Doors.

'Thank you.'

In the only photos he has of his dad, he looks like Jim Morrison. So much so, when Erik

first started listening to The Doors as a boy, he was convinced Jim Morrison was his dad.

The waiter appears with their food.

'Any luck with the table?' Erik asks, nodding at Gail. 'My wife. She's cold.'

The waiter stares at the two plates of food in his hands.

'It's fine,' Gail says, gesturing for the waiter to give her the food. 'I'm hungry.'

'I'm sorry,' the waiter says.

'No,' Erik says. 'There's a table over there. We're moving.'

Erik stands and waits for Gail to follow him. Without looking at the waiter, he holds her hand and takes her further into the restaurant, two tables away from an open fire.

The waiter doesn't say anything, only places their food on the table and leaves them to eat.

She collects a swirl of pasta on her fork.

'He didn't like that,' she says, smiling.

'It's a power trip with some of them.'

A minute later, she asks, 'You are done with all that?'

He stops eating.

She clears her throat and says, 'Really done? With her?'

'I've told you. It's been over a long time.'

She returns to her food.

He reaches for the LP. When he was a child he played his dad's LPs over and over. The smell of the cardboard and vinyl, the gentle hiss of the spinning record and the crackle when the needle dropped. He can hear the opening riff of the first track on side A: 'Roadhouse Blues', as though played somewhere close enough in place or time to hear its echo.

Behind Gail the open fire smoulders. Her face is flushed with warmth, food and wine.

In the floor-to-ceiling window next to the table they vacated is their reflection. They are no longer sitting in the snow, but bathed in the orange of the open fireplace.

He is forgiven.

His favourite track on *Morrison Hotel*, 'Indian Summer', is on side B. Maybe life is like a vinyl LP: you reach the end of side A and then turn over, drop the needle and begin again.

# Dinosaur

It happens when Rebecca least expects it; bathed in sunshine streaming through the window, Erik is sat at a table next to the door.

‘Everything okay?’ Adam asks.

Rebecca looks again — it’s not him.

‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘You were saying?’

‘So they landed it. Right there, on the asteroid. A probe.’

‘I remember. Rosetta.’

Adam drinks from his wine glass.

‘Amazing,’ he says, taking up his fork.

‘Didn’t it cost something like a billion dollars?’

‘If I had a billion dollars, landing a spacecraft on an asteroid is definitely something I’d do with it.’

‘But, isn’t it a lot. And for what?’

‘Well, now we know we can do it.’

‘So?’

Adam puts down his fork. ‘Have you heard of the Chicxulub crater?’

She shakes her head and glances over to the man she thought was Erik.

‘It’s in Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula, around nine miles in diameter. The asteroid hit the earth sixty-six million years ago. Asteroids that big are called “civilisation enders”. You know what it did?’

‘Killed the dinosaurs?’

‘Along with three quarters of every living thing on the planet.’

The man she thought was Erik walks towards their table. Rebecca holds her breath as he walks past. There is only a fleeting resemblance. She recalls reading Hemingway to him, telling him how the earth moves only three times for each of us in a lifetime. For Erik, she was his third. For her, he was her second.

She asks Adam, ‘How many times have you been in love?’

He looks up at the ceiling, finishes chewing, and says, ‘twice.’

‘You really had to think about that.’

‘Why are you smiling?’ he asks.

‘No reason.’

‘You know,’ he says, ‘there was an asteroid that landed in Russia around thirty million years ago. The impact instantaneously transformed the graphite in the ground into diamonds.’

Rebecca pushes the pasta around the bowl with her fork. Moments in life are asteroids, she thinks. Some of them don’t last, and burn up in the atmosphere. But others are like the one that made the Chicxulub crater, scarring the surface of a planet for millions of years. Some asteroids kill, can end whole species, might end civilisations. Such an asteroid,

massive, speeding through empty space for a billion years, struck the earth and killed every last dinosaur.

‘What about you?’ he asks. ‘How many?’

She holds up a peace sign.

‘You thought that was him, didn’t you? Erik.’

She crosses her arms.

‘It’s okay,’ he says. ‘Even after a massive impact like Chicxulub, life carries on. The dinosaurs weren’t killed off. Birds are dinosaurs. Little dinosaurs.’

*Little dinosaur.* That’s what Erik called her. She was curled up on his bed, pretending to sleep, his hand tracing the bumps of her spine.

‘You’re going to write about all this aren’t you?’ she says. ‘Everything I’ve told you.’

He shrugs his shoulders and smiles.

‘You’ve no one to blame but yourself. You knew I was a writer.’

‘You have a title?’

‘I have some ideas. It’s good to know the title before you start writing.’

‘Does it have a happy ending?’ she asks.

‘For me? Yes.’

‘And me?’

‘I hope so.’

She holds his stare. ‘You know I love you, don’t you?’

‘I want you to choose,’ he says.

‘What?’

‘The title. It’s your story. I want you to choose.’

She takes the napkin from her lap, and after dabbing her mouth, gives him the title.

To read more of Adam's stories and sign up to his mailing list, visit [adamlock.net](http://adamlock.net).  
Visit [ellipsizine.com](http://ellipsizine.com) to find more flash fiction collections.



# No one chooses who to love, only who to be with.

*Dinosaur follows the lives of Rebecca and Erik, intertwining their stories in a way only flash fiction can. Although their lives are held close within the pages of this Novella-in-Flash, they meet for only a short, albeit life-changing, time.*

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