

## The White March

I close my eyes, then open them again. It's worse when you close them, because then the only sensory effects that you get are the screaming of the engines and the dipping in your stomach as the plane tilts skywards, buffeting its way through the clouds. You're alone with your fears, like when the dentist's hovering over you with steel claws, or your breast is flattening on the mammograph anvil. I pick up my book and force myself to concentrate, reading the same paragraph over and over again until the words make sense. Then I focus on the photo of the baby's face I'm using as a bookmark. My first grandchild. She's already three months old and this is just the second time that I'll see her.

We had gone together, Paolo and I, at the time of the birth, arriving just hours later. We hadn't stayed long, though, as he had medical appointments scheduled back in Brussels, and I wanted to be by his side. Sophie and Martin seemed to be managing fine with the baby when we left.

I'm alert to every new sound, checking the reactions of the other passengers and the flight attendants. I wish I'd put on more deodorant. I can smell my armpits. I used to hold Paolo's hand tightly at take-off and arrival, too tightly probably, but he never complained. How trivial to feel his loss in this way, the loss of his hand.

The trolley trundles down the aisle, and I prepare to catch the eye of the flight attendant just visible on the other side. I never used to mind flying, but everyone says the same thing: once you have children, you become aware of all the things that could harm them, things that you have no control over.

The attendant is speaking to a man sitting a few rows ahead. I can see his silver hair above the seat, and a navy-sleeved arm raised in argument. I shift uneasily and my heartbeat moves up a gear.

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The Dutroux scandal emerged in Brussels when I was pregnant with our second daughter. Sophie, our first, was a three-year-old toddler at the time. Riveted to the TV, I had watched the arrest of this man who, abetted by his wife, had abducted two small girls and kept them imprisoned in a basement. By the time the police found them, they had died.

They called it the *Marche blanche*, the White March. A huge demonstration in Brussels to protest against the police and the justice system for the way they'd botched the investigation. I was six months' pregnant; I was determined to go on the march. Paolo had to work unexpectedly that Saturday. I had a rendezvous with some parents from the crèche near the *métro* station where the march would start. I bought some white balloons.

It was October, but mild. The *métro* was crowded and I would not push onto it with Sophie, so I waited for the next one, and then the next one. When we at last emerged, it was into a sea of white. No sign of the parents from the crèche. Oh well, I thought, we're here now. I blew up a white balloon and tied a string to it, putting it in Sophie's little fist, and we joined the throng.

Children dressed in white ran and skipped alongside me. People chattered in French and Flemish while I manoeuvred the buggy over potholes. I focused on why I was there: solidarity. Surely this would be of some comfort to the bereft parents, to see the thousands – hundreds of thousands as I found out later on the news – marching respectfully, wearing white for innocence. Marching with their children. What would they make of that? All those children, the same age as their lost daughters, not fully understanding what was going on, while their daughters had had their childhood stolen from them in one fell swoop.

The crowd swirled and eddied around me. I brushed some sweat from my brow. I felt a ringing in my ears. I'd forgotten to bring water. To the right of us was a small street, so I

nudged through the marching bodies and up the street a little way, until I spotted a low windowsill where I could perch. Sophie had behaved herself beautifully all along, gazing at the other children and the crowds and holding tightly onto her white balloon, but now, looking round to see why we'd stopped, the balloon drifted off into the air. She began to protest.

I counted my breath in and counted it out again.

'Mama!'

'Don't worry, Sophie, there are more at home, loads of balloons.'

'Home!' Sophie shouted. Her determined little character was already showing. ET home. If only there was a mothership to take me to safety. My own mother had died suddenly when I was twenty. I'd felt the absence more than ever when I was pregnant. Things should pass through generations; there should be a flow of knowledge, care and experience. That well was dry. Paolo's parents lived in Italy so we saw them only once or twice a year. My mother-in-law was kind, but preoccupied with her career as a lecturer. I always felt that I had to put on a show when around them, a façade of being an efficient mother, knowing what exactly the baby wanted.

The door of the house where I sat opened and a man stepped out, halting suddenly on seeing me. He crossed the street towards a large saloon car, then turned around and came back.

Looking pointedly at my swollen belly, he said: '*Ça va? Vous allez bien?*'

My hand gripped the buggy tightly as I replied in French, I'm fine, thanks.

Then thinking that perhaps he didn't like me sitting on his windowsill, I stood up and made to leave, but the light-headedness assailed me again, and I moved back to the sill and leaned against it.

'I will get you some water,' he said, unlocking the door and disappearing inside.

My thoughts spiralled. Perhaps he'd drug the water and then carry me inside, and what about Sophie... But each time I stood up, the dizziness returned. I reached in my bag, feeling reassured at the sight of my Nokia. I wanted to call Paolo and say, I'm feeling a bit dizzy. Come and get us. Then I realised that I didn't know the name of this street.

The man returned with a bottle of Spa and a glass. He unscrewed the top – I noted that it was a new bottle not previously opened – and half-filled the glass.

'And the little girl?' he queried. I sipped the ice-cold water from the glass. I fumbled in the changing bag on the back of the buggy and extracted Sophie's pink plastic training cup. The man filled it and I replaced the lid.

'Lo-lo,' said Sophie, stretching out her tiny paw.

Inadvertently, I caught the man's eye, and we both smiled at the childish term. I had been astonished to learn at the crèche that toddlers had their own version of French. 'Lo-lo' was water, *l'eau*. 'Dodo' was sleep, *dormir*.

He was perhaps in his fifties, with silver-grey hair and tanned skin. He was dressed in dark trousers and a pale shirt, with a navy jacket on top. He looked decent, middle-class, well-educated. There was a time when we thought people like that could do no wrong.

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The attendant raises her voice. 'I'm afraid we only accept cards, sir. There's nothing I can do about it.' The seatbelt light switches on with a warning ring. I grip the arms of my seat and turn to the woman beside me, who continues reading her glossy magazine.

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'You were at the march?' the man asked, pointing down the street where wave after wave of white shapes washed along the avenue.

‘Yes, but ... I felt dizzy...’

The man shrugged. ‘For all the good it will do...Where do you live?’

Without thinking, I mentioned the street.

‘I must pass near there to get to the motorway. I can give you a lift, if you want?’

‘It’s ok. I can get a taxi.’ I finished the water and stood up, swaying slightly.

‘It will take a long time for a taxi to get through, with the demonstration.’

I thought of the walk back to the *métro* station, and of having to call Paolo and get him out of work at a time when bosses were not so understanding about a father’s duties. I then did something that still puzzles and alarms me.

His car was parked just across the road, and I held Sophie as he folded the buggy and stowed it in the boot. Then he opened the rear door. ‘You’ll both be safer back here.’

I was about to call Paolo, but something stayed my hand. It would look as if I didn’t trust him, this stranger into whose car I was willingly stepping with my three-year-old child. I wondered about that afterwards, my reluctance to upset a stranger. It was a struggle to settle myself and Sophie in the back seat, one seatbelt between us. The man watched and then moved off, the large black saloon thrusting forward swiftly and silently. A heady scent filled the air, jasmine or gardenia, I wasn’t sure which, but it was tinged with a chemical aftertaste. I opened the car window slightly.

I removed my phone from my bag. Later on, for a long time, heat would suffuse me as I thought of myself in the back seat of that car, phone in hand, doing nothing. I caught the man’s eyes in the rear-view mirror and looked away quickly, taking in the posters on windows advertising the march, and the photos of the two tooth-gapped children.

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It occurred to me, as I heard the click of the automatic locks, that accepting a lift from him, a stranger, was like Sophie accepting a lift from a stranger. I had done this in the company of a small child.

‘Do you have children?’ I asked, striving for normality. The seat belt was tight against my belly and I had one arm around Sophie. The houses flashing by were typical Brussels style, adorned with shapely bay windows protected by wrought-iron balustrades. It was all so ordinary.

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The trolley is still blocked a few rows up. I swallow deliberately to moisturise my throat. I badly need some tea. The argument continues, as the attendant serves people on other side of the aisle.

‘Refusing cash is illegal,’ the man protests. His English is good, his accent Belgian. ‘You can’t do that.’

‘I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about it,’ the attendant is patient, but her tone has risen slightly.

I want to say, I’ll pay for your drink with my card. But I don’t want to see the man’s face.

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The man said that he had two children, now grown up.

There was a brief silence.

‘In twenty years, you’ll wonder how it all passed so quickly, and if you should have done things differently.’

‘Is there something you would have done differently?’

‘They copy you, you see, even if you try to point them in a different direction. They end up making some of the mistakes you made yourself.’

(Oh dear.)

The car bounded along, it seemed to me, travelling too fast down avenues and boulevards that were not familiar to me. But it couldn’t have been going that fast: there were buses and other cars; there were speed bumps, traffic lights. I caught sight of a street name I knew, and mentally traced our way back home, the streets we should take, and saw that he had missed a leftward turn. I put down my phone and rubbed my sweating palm on my jacket.

‘You should have taken avenue d’Auderghem back there.’ Such an effort, to make my voice stop shaking.

‘This is a shortcut,’ he replied, and I felt the car accelerate. I glanced at Sophie, who stared back, her eyes wide and a furrow on her tiny brow.

I had to remove my arm from Sophie’s shoulder to message Paolo. Punching in the right letter took three strikes on the Nokia, more even, as my fingers trembled. What to put? I’m in a car, with a stranger, with our daughter. I think he’s going the wrong way. I don’t know the make of the car or the numberplate. This would take ages. I would call him. To hell with his meeting. As I held the phone against my ear, I caught the man’s eyes again in the rear-view mirror. We stared at one another a fraction of a second too long. He swung the car off a roundabout onto a small street, and then turned left. I recognised it.

‘We’re on the next street, on the right,’ I pointed out, feeling lightheaded again as he manoeuvred the car into our street.

He exited the car and opened the back door for me. In my haste to get out, I tugged at the seatbelt, which stuck and then finally gave.

‘Mama home,’ Sophie said, pointing at the house.

‘Here you are.’ The man lifted the buggy from the boot.

‘Bye, papa,’ Sophie said, waving.

To Sophie, every man was a ‘papa’. Any man who appeared at the crèche was a father, there to pick up his child. I couldn’t help a nervous laugh, tightening my hold on Sophie.

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The plane tilts downwards slightly; I can feel it in my ears. I think of Sophie’s face as we were leaving after the birth, the look that crossed it, that puzzled me at the time, but that I now think might have been a signal. I remember how awkward I had felt just bathing Sophie when she was a few days old.

Sophie’s wide-eyed stare in that man’s car comes back to me, like an image zooming on a screen. We had kept a close watch over her and her sister. Perhaps too close. We had driven to Italy every year on holiday, like many people in Belgium do, hardly ever taking the plane.

Sophie moved to Dublin to study, and remained there. Her sister, Bianca, is in Boston, doing a Master’s. I hardly know Sophie’s partner. I fear that I will hardly know my granddaughter.

As the plane continues its gentle descent, I curse myself for not responding to Sophie’s call, and going right back to her after the funeral. Now I am on edge, unable to wait to see her again, to hold my granddaughter in my arms, and see Bianca, who would come for the christening.



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I realise that I haven't been supervising our descent, holding my breath, my body tensed to help the plane down safely. We land with a gentle bump.