

# **This is the Sound When a Dog Cries**

*Janine Warren*

When the rain comes it is like white teeth spat out on to the pavement, people flurrying for shelter under the arches of the pier, the wind rising, heavy with sea salt and sand. We hurry into the nearest café, a feigned French place, selling plastic croissants and dried-up baguettes, cheaply framed photos of a black-and-white Paris fading on the wall, the rain falling heavy now, hissing at the window. I can smell the dampness on your hair and on your clothes, it's the scent of an English summer. People enter shaking umbrellas and settling around us.

The girl who serves us is Polish, slender, dark-haired, perhaps about nineteen. She looks tired and uninterested. You order for us both, cups of tea and almond croissants, then make your excuses and hurry across the road to buy newspapers. I watch you through the mist that is coating the inside of the café windows as you dodge the cars that sizzle across wet tarmac. You are dressed in an old dark fitted suit, waistcoat and faded white shirt, dice cufflinks at the wrist and world-weary black Chelsea boots. You look like you've been lost in the Mojave Desert for nigh on thirty years, like you could empty your boots of sand and dried-up scorpions; your hair slightly too long and peppered with grey, you run your hands over it to put it back in place as you cross back with the newspapers under your arm. You pretend not to notice that I am watching you. I am sat picking at my croissant, turning it to crumbs between my fingers. There is an unspoken tension between us. Trawling through the Saturday papers, momentarily I look up and catch you sedately watching me. I feel like an actress in your midst. The rain eases and you whisper to me that it is time to leave. You gather the mauled papers in your hand, pay, and then like a gentleman open the door of the café for me. We walk back to your apartment; the early evening air is cool, fresh and fragrant from the downpour, the roads are quiet now. You take my hand and my heart beats like lonely footsteps on late-night streets. Behind closed doors and still-opened curtains in lamp-lit parlours, families are busying themselves, evening meals to be prepared, televisions chattering.

Marooned in your one-room seaside retreat, the evening sun slipping, we listen to piano sonatas, the breeze begging at the half-opened window, the swish of the towering sycamore trees and the occasional rumble as the trains pass on the tracks below. You serve dinner in the valley that lies at the foot of the bed, bowls of hot steaming soup and crusty bread with strawberries to follow. Reality lays snarling and yapping like a hungry wolfhound at the door at night, as I lay on my back watching imaginary sunsets and dreaming of lazy train journeys to Montreal. I hear it howl. The hours they fizzle past, their momentum slow and untamed. Night falls into morning as dawn cracks and creaks languid through the curtains with the sound of birdsong. Each day we pray for more rain.

Monday morning comes moaning the blues, the hound's breath shallow as the weekend subsides. Last night you slept with a fever, hot and shivering beside me, delirious and half waking. When I depart I leave you sleeping, too early for goodbyes. I make the train by a whisper.

I fall into a seat, catching my breath. I'm travelling backwards to London Waterloo, feeling disjointed, the weekend like a vapour trail spreads out behind me; countryside unravels staring through treetops at ragged grey skies. Mist lying on the fields like linen, settled so still like a breath, bric-a-brac houses fly by, you still lie feverishly sleeping, the bed still warm from where I lay beside you just moments before. And as I draw ever closer to London I hear the wolfhound stirring, he's on my heels snapping and gnarling, licking his lips. The train rattles on the tracks like some out-of-control beast taking me ever closer to be swallowed up in the smoke and the fumes, my head in tatters and my teeth aching.

I hit London in the morning rush hour, travelling north on the Victoria line, life, loves and Liverpool come rushing past like the ghosts of Christmas past. I am watching the passengers come and go. At Warren Street a man, ruddy faced, dishevelled and dirty, boards the train, hanging on to a box of Marks and Spencer's Cherry

Liqueurs, his pockets stuffed with old paperbacks. He departs at Finsbury Park leaving a trail of toffee eclairs tumbling from the ripped seams of his pockets.

Today you will breakfast alone, no picnics in the valley that lies at the foot of your bed, weekends spent marooned on that small feathered island in your room, curtains drawn, outside world kept at bay, only seen through half-read copies of the *Guardian*.

These are the first few days of a romance formed on a year-long trail of intermittent emails and missed opportunities, stemmed from a chance late-night meeting in the dark, drunken depths of a Brixton pub. The days when you wonder where you are heading, if you are heading anywhere at all, where you lay yourself bare like rooftops in the rain.

At home tonight the house will be cold, water pouring through the kitchen ceiling. The cat will be hungry; my heart will feel wretched. I will undress and turn the lights out with a sigh. In my mind as sleep hollers I am tracing the skull and cross bones on your skin, picturing you alone in your room, outside your window the white cliffs are crumbling and the seas they are forgiving. For this is the sound when a dog cries.

And as the days lazily pass and I wake alone in my bed feeling broken and breathless, listening to birdsong from the garden and remembering your voice like a whisper, misheard and floating on the wind, like I was just tracing paper in your arms. My heart is breaking to Glen Campbell songs and no one is to blame for the rain.