

5

Saturday night is film night and you repeatedly choose to rent sad films. As you huddle over the DVD player, your wife waits on the couch and asks for basic plot outlines.

It's about conjoined twins who attempt to be separated to pursue differing sexualities.

*...a soothsayer able to envision all fortunes but his own.*

*...two lovers who abandon promising futures so they can live together in perpetual mediocrity.*

*...a doomed vegan's struggle as a castaway on a desert island without a reliable supply of chia seeds.*

And to reassure her of the emotional impact, you'll cite the opinions of others.

*My podiatrist said she found it profoundly moving.*

*I overheard two garbagemen describe it as the most heartbreaking film they'd ever seen.*

You make sure there are tissues on the coffee table within grasp. She is always skeptical and yet usually makes extractions from the tissue box at the predictable moments. As she dabs her eyes, sometimes blows her nose, the tissues billow like white flags held in surrender. It would be a symptom of weakness, but you wish you were tearing as well. Instead, you sit motionless in a room of flickering illumination and you can feel the hypothesis strengthening, validating itself.

You're forty-three and you think you've lost the ability to cry.

A nagging tide that has been lapping at your peace of mind for some time, worn you down and moulded you into acceptance. Once a source of pride, now an overwhelming shame. Now you clandestinely spend the moments before sleep imagining horrible things happening to you and the people you care about, thinking that surely if such circumstances eventuated you'd be sobbing. But you're not sure.

Most weeknights you eat dinner and watch the evening news simultaneously. You eat slowly for the entire thirty-minute bulletin, absorbing every telecommunicated word and image in the hope that something you imbibe will activate your dormant tear ducts. On one occasion there was a report detailing a tree that had fallen into a playground. You became so consumed by the tragedy that you began to violently choke on your food. After your wife had successfully employed the Heimlich manoeuvre you both collapsed onto the floor in exhaustion, the offending piece of butter chicken having been relocated to another part of the lounge room, inconspicuous in its lather of oesophageal fluid.

By now she knew everything.

*So were you crying or just choking?*

*Just choking.*

*I'm sorry to hear that.*

On another evening, there is intense speculation of nuclear war between two distant nations. You wait eagerly for further developments the next day, but feel cheated when it is announced they have since come to a diplomatic understanding. Unable to explain this to your wife, you raise the issue with the man in the adjacent partition at the office.

*Your commitment to watching the news is making you desensitised, rather than sympathetic, he says. You're craving more incredible stories, regardless of the suffering to others they represent.*

*What can I do?*

*I'm not sure. I think you might have the psychopath gene.*

Severe panic until a psychologist refutes this diagnosis. After two consultations it would appear your levels of empathy and remorse are inconsistent with those typical of a psychopath. The psychologist congratulates you as if these were an achievement.

*But could I be depressed?*

*No.*

*Then why can't I cry?*

The ophthalmologist takes ten minutes to rule out any ocular malady. Says your tear ducts appear properly connected and contain sufficient fluid.

*Looks like somebody just can't turn on the waterworks.*

He finds it all a big joke, to the extent his stomach shakes from laughter.

You annoy the hypnotherapist as she attempts to initiate your tear ducts via the gateway of the unconscious mind. She senses a lack of equilibrium, an unfocused demeanour. She tells you the treatment will only work if you fully embrace its therapeutic potential. You apologise and she tries again to navigate you towards intense relaxation. Once you break wind, she clearly loses all hope, and as good as asks you to leave.

Returning to the office, you report to the workmate whose counselling had proved erroneous.

*Good news, I'm not a psychopath.*

*Fantastic. I'll get rid of this then.*

And he opens a drawer below his desk to reveal a police issue taser. The cartridge is unloaded, but this comes as petty reassurance.

*My sister is a police officer.*

He says it as if it explains everything.

4

With your colleagues assembled, you stand precariously on a wheeled desk chair to make an announcement. You have decided that in your quest to cry it would henceforth be appropriate for all workers in the office to unreservedly bully you, thereby cultivating a proper environment of misery. Initially most are hesitant, but a lady from the accounts department mutters something about it being good for everybody to unite behind a common goal and a few heads wobble their agreement. A manager cunningly pulls at your chair and you topple awkwardly from the perch, crashing heavily into the photocopier. Unanimous laughter.

And the workplace adapts quickly. The group of chess enthusiasts you previously lunched with now tell you their table is full and use the spare seat as a footrest. Others gather to throw darts at an unflattering photograph of your head, the left nostril equating to inner bullseye. As you stand alone and unguarded like a solitary gnu at the water dispenser, an unassumingly predatory member of the sales team dacks you, revealing twenty-year-old underwear. Your keyboard is sticky and your computer has a virus. The cleaning staff begins ignoring your desk and its surrounding territories, allowing deliberate depositions of pubic hairs to accumulate. Somebody repeatedly removes the staples from your stapler. From the other side of the office, people call out your name, then claim they never said anything once you respond.

But you don't really feel sad and certainly don't make any progress towards crying. Instead, the increasingly nasty measures your co-workers take seem to affirm their willingness to help. Your ego is lifted by a sense of belonging.

It's an unsustainable charade, however. Your boss, himself guilty of making hoax calls to the phone at your desk, confronts you with a graph illustrating a catastrophic decline in workplace productivity in the month since you declared war on yourself. He is sorry but feels he has no option but to let you go.

The crowd boos and hisses as you shuffle to the elevator for the final time, carrying a cardboard box with belongings that weren't stolen in the previous weeks. The doors slide open, and the voices grow weary and repentant when you're inside.

Your wife is told the unfortunate news as you both clean the daily dishes. She weeps and her tears fizz as they hit the foam of the detergent in the sink. Emotionless, you barely dry the plates because you're using a dampened rag. Hate washing dishes, can't remember the last time you went out to eat.

In fact, the next weekend you remember an old friend who now owns a restaurant on the other side of the city. You arrive for dinner and he wraps you in a suffocating hug, such that you emerge with a purple hue to your face.

*Haven't seen you in years. I've missed you,* he says.

You doubt your name or your visage has even crossed his mind during this period but you breathlessly agree that you've missed him too. He personally seats you and your wife at a table and references menu items like they are children.

*My duck terrine is doing well for itself.*

*The truffle risotto is showing a lot of maturity at the moment.*

Possibly a veiled admission that previous days' risottos are being recycled. While you eat, he condenses his past few years into a cluttered monologue: the simultaneous pregnancies of his wife and daughter, his successful face-lift, the death of his budgerigars in a house fire, his burgeoning interest in rock-climbing. You try to be similarly concise but finally reveal your recent firing and the fact that it was partly because of your inability to cry. Your friend's sympathies are clear. Before you leave, he tells you privately there is a need for a kitchen hand and offers you the role. You accept because the money is reasonable and you're in no position to refuse.

After the first evening working at the restaurant, you arrive home late and smelling of onions. A cloud of the pervasive aroma swirls and drops in your wake as you stagger through the house. Your wife can't help but cry during lovemaking, merely an unavoidable reaction to the anaphrodisiac you've introduced to the bedroom. But she doesn't ask you why the smell is so strong until you both sit upright and dissatisfied against the headboard in the aftermath.

You tell her how the previous kitchen hand had been let go because of his alarming sensitivity to the chemical released by ruptured onions. Cried so much that his tears dampened the meals he helped to prepare and customers complained. A food critic had described the restaurant's minestrone as being 'the saltiest and most watery' in the whole city, unaware that it had merely been spoiled by an influx of tears. And so to ensure the quality of the food, all tasks involving onions had been shifted to your jurisdiction. The perfect employee, because you're unable to cry. To call you a kitchen hand would be mistaken, 'coordinator of onions' more fitting.

The recount finished, you turn and see your wife is nodding solemnly. She stares up at the constellations of glow-in-the-dark stickers on the bedroom ceiling, stars locked in plaster. Remnants of the previous owners that you'd never bothered to remove. A child's bedroom in a former life.

You shower, hoping to wash off the onion stench. Afterwards you wipe the mist off the mirror with a towel and stare at your naked upper body without blinking. A dusty film accumulates over your eyeball. You opt to clean it off with running water from the tap.

3

Now you spend most evenings tediously reducing vegetables into smaller pieces at the restaurant, your sub-conscious sometimes occupied by trying to pinpoint the last tears you cried as co-ordinates in time.

Two possible candidates, so long ago. You cried after falling out of tree and breaking your collarbone. You cried on the morning of your thirteenth birthday because you didn't want to grow up. Uncertainty as to which event stands as more recent. In both cases your mother told you to stop being a pansy when your father was out of earshot.

But you also remember how in your early teenage years you didn't cry at your grandmother's funeral. Two pews at the front of the church filled with mourning kin and you were probably the only one with dry eyes. Over-thinking your emotions. Feeling sad, but not crying. Often losing track of the priestly monotone and flicking through the booklet with photos from your grandmother's life, surprised that she'd once had great teeth. You'd only really known her with Alzheimers. Except the cause of death had been broken heart, three weeks and four days after her husband passed. You hadn't cried at that funeral either.

Your older brother had confronted you about your absence of tears at the wake. With a mouthful of catered sausage rolls, he loudly claimed your lack of tears as evidence that you hadn't loved either grandparent. Hearing this, your aunty had rushed over. She was chewing the tough meat of a party pie at the same time as explaining that a person should never be judged for how they respond to a tragedy, that everybody expresses feelings differently. Your now parentless father locked himself in the toilet for the majority of the next week so that you wouldn't see him cry.

So now you're forty-three and you organise to see your older brother. He lives only two blocks away, but you haven't seen each other since Christmas. In the afternoon, you sit on flimsy beach

chairs under the lemon tree in your backyard while he smokes rolled cigarettes and you bite your fingernails. You tell him about the emotional predicament and find it hard to gauge his thoughts for the ensuing minute of silence. He wears dark sunglasses even though you're largely in the shade, any sunlight dappled by the clustered overhang of branches, leaves, lemons.

*What about physical pain? Could that make you cry?*

*I don't think so.*

He tells you to roll up a sleeve of your shirt, presses the stub of his cigarette against the earth, takes your arm. He hasn't given you a Chinese burn since you were ten but your forearm tenses in recollection of childhood pain. His hands belong to a builder, now. They're scarred and calloused, yet stronger. You close your eyes as he wrings your skin like a towel. The pain pulses from your arm. You gasp expletives but he doesn't stop because he's waiting for your eyes to water, like they did in the case of your ten-year-old self.

Roused by the commotion, your neighbour appears and asks if everything is okay. Old man, snowy hair, always wears gumboots but you can't see them now because he's merely a head elevated above a fence-line. Your brother releases your arm and tells him everything is just fine, thank you. Your neighbour expresses relief, pauses a moment, then asks about borrowing a Phillips head screwdriver.

2

A frigid morning and you're moving towards parliament amidst a crowd of protestors. Cocooning near the middle, starting to waddle lazily, like a penguin you saw in a documentary. You wave a bigoted placard for a cause you don't support. You're silent because you don't know any of the assemblies' chants, avoided going to rehearsals.

Their anger intensifies at the steps of the important building and they fan out across a metal barricade. Behind this stands a garrison of police, a few upraised by horses that appear bored. Somebody comments that it's starting to rain, but truly the moisture is just spit attached to angry words. Another claims hail, but it's the battering of errantly thrown stones.

Three helmeted policemen are wrestling with a small group of demonstrators attempting to climb the railing. With unassuming purpose, you use your placard to push through the mob and arrive on the outskirts of the scuffle. A very fat man wearing an offensive T-shirt is about to be pepper sprayed, but you step in front of him and a jet of orange assails your face. Self-interest, not heroism. The fat man crouches beside you as writhe on the ground, the heat pulling your eyes to a close. Aloud, he wonders why you're not crying. So the plan has failed.

There's a packed suitcase and a pillow beside the front door when you're late home. No need to explain the swollen disfigurement of your face to your wife as she steps around you to claim the baggage. She saw footage of your peppery capitulation on the television news, now is a little bewildered and says she's going to stay at her hairdresser's house for a while. So she can think. And it's strange to see her life abbreviated into such a small suitcase. You say nothing but linger to watch the car depart, framed within the dimensions of puffy eyelids.

A colder bed but your limbs extend to take advantage of the extra space. Gazing at the stars on the ceiling, trying to read your fixed horoscope. You swear one of the stickers shoots towards the window but you forget to make a wish.

With so much uncertainty crowding the future, part of you clings hard to the past. Proposing that she marry you halfway through a game of mini golf. Sex on the night of the day a doctor had advised you'd never have children. Cleaning the glass off her jumper after the bus you'd both been passengers on had sideswiped a pole. That had been your first meeting.

Memories that throw you into a relentless sadness that you can't physically express.

Images of the hairdresser crossing and re-crossing your wife's hair into a plait before you fall asleep. You're unsure if the idea is born in a dream or in the final throes of wakefulness.

1

You're eating breakfast under the lemon tree in the yard. You snatch lemons as your pancakes become sugary and run out of juice.

You don't discern the sound of the car's engine, but suddenly she's at the back door, then kicking daffodils as she moves across the lawn. Lips solemn, but eyes smiling. No plait in her hair. She takes one of the pancakes from the top of the stack and folds it carefully as is custom. Sits next to you on the ground while she eats. When she's finished it's not certain whether she kisses you or you kiss her.

*I'm sorry.*

From both voices, a simultaneous apology. Then she takes the initiative.

*I couldn't stay. I was allergic to their cat. Everything made me sneeze.*

You're noticing her sniffing but she's looking closely at your face.

*Were you crying?*

*Yes, actually.*

And you reach for the little spray bottle you've filled with water, give two short squirts in the vicinity of your eyes that are still reddened from peppering, feel these synthetic tears struggle down your cheek and reach the precipice of chin before falling to the grass.

*I'm keeping this bottle with me in case I need to express myself.*

And she shakes her head and laughs at the silliness of it all, laughs as you flood your face with water, compensating for drought. A puddle on the ground and the lemon tree takes it thirstily.