

THE SECOND FATHER

July 2010

Here's me supplanted, replaced, reduced. Reduced to this. Someone's in my house. Look in the window and see, there's Julia my wife and Bo and Bea the kids, curled up watching television—a perfect domestic tableau, a real twenty-first century Van Eyck, (except Julia's not deathly pregnant and I'm not some po-faced merchant limply holding her hand and it's not autumn). Instead, I'm the overweight balding guy standing in the dark in the winter snow like a thief, peering through the window at my little family and shivering.

Let's do a roll call: there's Julia, the wife, Bo the teen, body in place but attention assiduously on the technology, and Bea at two-and-a-half still the baby. That's three. And then there's me out in the cold, snow up to my ankles, four. All of us in our little family boat, navigating each day in turn: doing the best we can. But look now, see her lips move. Julia turns her head and laughingly addresses...who? There's someone else in the room in back, I can't see past the curtains but there's definitely a someone.

How long had this been going on? I'm not sure. When did it start? Hard to say. It was at dinner a fortnight ago (it may have been longer) when Julia started talking to me in the third person: 'Would Peter like some more vitello tonato?' When I didn't answer she said to Bo who was busy fuelling up, 'Pass the casserole to your father.'

'Your father's right here,' I said. 'I mean *I* am here before you.'

Bo rolled his eyes and offered the Pyrex dish. But by then my appetite had curdled.

It continued at breakfast the following morning and I even joined in myself for a joke: 'would the family pass the juice to the father? Would the son please put cereal on the grocery list? Does the mother think that the blue tie is serious enough for the father's management meeting or should he wear the crimson?'

The joke had become infectious so that Bea, who was too young to understand, tried it out as well. That night she greeted me at the door with: 'Look it's the father.'

'I'm your father.'

'That's right, you're a father.'

'No, not a father, *the* father, the papa, il padrone, daddy, call me daddy-oh. OK? '

Mistaking my emphasis for annoyance, she put her thumb in her trembling mouth. At which point I had no choice but to pick her up and hold her to me, making reassuring cooing noises.

'OK you can be father number one,' she pronounced and blessed my cheek with a sticky hand.

—

Was it stress? Had I lost my perspective? Work was uncertain but no more than usual. Rumours of reductions had been breaking out like spot fires and with a new director to be appointed any day, we all attended each candidate's particular phrasing and nuances. Management had off-the-record reassured us that core business would continue regardless of the budgetary emergency and recruitment freeze and you couldn't get more core than our own particular jobs. Our own positions were secure but we viewed peripheral others with alternating sympathy and envy.

—

By the end of the week it was getting too much: I had to know. So there we were in underwear and t-shirts getting ready for bed when I popped the question. 'Julia,' I said. 'Is there someone?'

Statistically, if you've been married more than fifteen years forty per cent of the answers to this old chestnut would be, 'Yeah...', 'Sure...', 'And what do you care?' So I braced myself but she equivocated.

'What a ridiculous question. When does he think that I...?'

'Not "he", me. I'm right here,' I said.

She turned from her dresser and looked about as if she'd heard someone but couldn't see.

'Over here,' I waved from the land of bedclothes. I could have got up and taken her by the shoulders.

She turned back and said to her reflection. 'There is only one.'

That night I lay awake cherishing the warmth of her body, the spearmint-sour smell of her breath and her gentle snoring and feeling quietly maudlin at losing all this. It was obvious—of course there could only be one and that one is...

Father number two

What do I know about him? We have a lot in common. We share shaving practices, shoe sizes and shirt similarities, although he prefers the toiletry shelf arranged in bottle size—small to large rather than according to frequency of use—most often to rarely if ever. Not a deep reader, he prefers magazines—home carpentry, boat building. But he has a few likeable idiosyncrasies: a preference for spring green ties: a few have sprouted unexplained in my wardrobe and, like me, he nibbles the ends of his Staedler HBs before committing anything to paper. (I have yet to collect hair samples, saliva deposits or discarded dental floss.)

I also believe that he suspects. He must. Maybe he's going through the same tortuous uncertainties. But yesterday I came across his notepad on the bedside table. I hesitated for a moment. Would I like it if he read mine? But *he* hadn't made any effort to keep it private, indeed leaving it here on *my* table was provocative, it was brazen. Although the handwriting was familiar, it contained mostly poorly-thought through notions, speculative diagrams and odd-looking prototypes, but towards the back were his observations, his evidence gathering, his own forensics.

15 June

J tired and distracted. Started a conversation about moving to the coast but she was immediately irritated. Claimed we had talked about it the previous night (we hadn't) and that I had said we couldn't afford it (I hadn't).

22 June

New project at work. Proposal for the census approved. Finally we'll be able to know who exactly is where. A lot of work until the new recruits come on board. Bea called me father number two. So cute. Bo uninterested as usual unless it's about the latest iPhone. Out of the blue, J asked about redundancies at work. When I told her about the new project she looked surprised, mentioned some recruitment freeze. Where does she get these ideas?

6 July

Something definitely up. Someone (who?) is going through my clothes. Found favourite pair of shoes, soaking wet in back of cupboard and suit will have to go to cleaners—salt and water stains.

7 July

What's going on? J now sleeping in spare room. Says we argued last night. Suspect someone else (!). Lectured kids on leaving doors unlocked and not talking to strangers.

10 July

I know you're reading this—

It was a smack in the face. The notebook tumbled to the floor and I stood there with my hands open, the last possible doubt blown away. I must put it back. He can't know that I know—let him suspect all he likes but he'll never be certain, he's not entitled. While retrieving the book I glanced under the bed and there amongst the dust bunnies, tossed tissues and this month's *Modern Boating* was one abandoned singular shoe. A man's. Black but not mine (I hate buckles). I pulled it out and laid it plain and eloquent on J's pillow (we'd argued and she'd moved into the guest room).

Next morning at breakfast I confronted her. 'Come on Julia who is he?'

'Who?'

'The other, the notebook-writing-only-got-one-shoe-with-a-buckle guy?' She didn't respond. 'Who do you talk to at night before I come home? And what do you mean there's only one?'

Bea was sitting silent between us but then she whispered helpfully: 'He means the second father.'

—

Snow had jammed the trains across the city and semis had gone skating disastrously across several freeways so everything was way late. The connecting buses had all departed by the time the 6.15-all-stops finally arrived at our station, so it was eight o'clock as I was

walking up our street, just coming over the rise and there he was. He was closing our door and stepping out. I ducked behind a tree but he wasn't looking. In fact, he strode along as if he owned the place, as if this were his territory without question. I had to follow. Even though it was late and I was hungry and cold and had been walking for forty minutes already I had to see, had to know.

Down our street and then back to the station we went, caught the delayed cross-town express, me sitting one carriage away, surreptitiously keeping him in view. Finally, we disembarked on the far south side. I followed furtively, pitching from one shadow to the next but again he wasn't suspicious or even particularly observant, he just looked straight ahead. So we trudged through an industrial precinct and then a retail strip. Finally the factories and shops gave way to a row of terraces. He stepped up to one, found a key and entered. For a moment his face – that familiar face - was outlined in a buttery glow before the door closed.

So here's me window peeping again. By standing on a milk crate at a stretch I can just see in through their blinds—there's a woman curled on the couch, the light of the TV playing on the side of her face. I saw how her look changed to disappointment as he came in—as if he were a phantom closing over her. He bent down to kiss her but she turned her cheek aside and pushed him away, brushing raindrops from her arms and lap.

Here then was his family way across town; what does he want with mine? Interloper, intruder, gatecrasher onto my domestic deal. It was too much. I was going to have it out with him. Even if we argued and fought, even if he knocked me to the ground and cursed me and broke my lip or my nose. Go ahead, kick me in the ribs, knee me in the groin, leave me gasping on the pavement—I don't care, this has to stop. By now I'm up the stairs and knocking on the door my fists balled in my pockets as the door opened.

And there before me is a little boy, two maybe three, and before I can say anything he's smiling and leaping into my arms. 'Mum,' he calls over his shoulder while holding my cheek with a sweet sticky hand. 'Mum, the second father's come at last.'
