

Whiteout

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Time is what happens when nothing else happens
Richard Feynman

It was snowing.

On the bus to the rest home, M. almost leaned her forehead against the window – the cold merely an em dash from her skin.

Her breath left a thin film of condensation on the glass; it cried out for a little heart, a smiley face. But M. did not touch the vapour. She rubbed the itch from her fingertip and watched the flakes, the merry whirling, winter dancing around the city.

On the pavement, an old woman ploughed her shopping trolley through the pale sludge. With her other hand she tugged at a little grimy white dog, the lead pulled tight. His fur a drab camouflage, his coal-black eyes stolen from a blind snowman.

Snowing should not be a verb, M. thought to herself, just before she was pushed into her seat with a jolt. The bus, an accordion on wheels and diesel, skidded and swerved before the driver cursed and straightened the vehicle again; death deflected one more stop.

All this whirling, the playful crystals floating rather than falling – it has nothing to do with toil. The word lacks clout and heft, it lacks routine.

Snowing – it sounds like the wind caressing the top of a child's head with fingers of light.

M. knew snow. She had experienced plenty of snowstorms, Arctic blasts and blizzards, the shivering that makes your teeth rattle, the frostbite and the flying ice that rips your face to shreds. She had felt it, the numbness. The freezing cold that shatters your bones, that seizes your body like hellfire, that scorches every nerve ending – Dante had been right when he trapped the devil inside a block of ice: cold is the true inferno.

M. knew snow. And she knew rain, and lightning in the Swiss mountains and a fatal picnic. She knew the cruel sun on the beach, the barrel of a gun, gleaming in the light. She knew tropical storms, their approach, dark on the horizon, and how they ended up sucking palm trees from the soil.

Autumn. Of course M. knew autumn, with its shadow on sundials and its restless drifting through lanes. M. knew spring, with its jaunty violins and verses lying flat on their backs, languid on

the grass at the first hint of warmth. She knew summer, endless summer with its glare, arid promises and delicate blue.

M. knew the hail on her hands, the vicious cuts and the holes in her umbrella, and M. had seen meteorites crash down to earth, and frogs and scuba divers, and locusts darkening the sky and obliterating harvests. M. had seen everything fall from heaven, line after line, the most peculiar elements obeying the laws of gravity.

M. knew weather. She had earned her doctorate with a thesis on meteorological phenomena in the modern novel.

Initially, her research had focused on American authors who blatantly flouted the golden rule of crime writer Elmore Leonard – ‘*Never open a book with weather*’. Apparently the same applied to dream sequences, which did not belong in a novel either.

The melting snow in *The Secret History*, the cold front racing across the prairie in *The Corrections*, the windy February day and the invisible dog in *Foreign Affairs* – there was no shortage of rebels, and Tartt, Franzen (she had interviewed him once, briefly, and after fifteen minutes he had put his hand on hers, asking if she could get him a gram of coke) and Lurie were joined by a whole host of authors, all determined to thumb their noses at Leonard by explicitly opening their novels with the weather forecast.

It soon escalated. Until M., in a nocturnal flash of inspiration, thought of the volcano. The Indonesian volcanic eruption that plunged Europe into darkness and cold in 1816. The grey weather is said to have prompted Mary Shelley, Lord Byron and William Polidori to write their ghost stories. Vampires and sad monsters: all born of evil magma.

And so M. turned the reasoning on its head. What was the weather like when Tartt and her colleagues wrote their opening sentences? Did the real weather have an impact on its fictional counterpart? It took her years of research, and she had to learn to work with algorithms that let weather models go back in time, that forecast the past as it were, but as soon as she published her elaborate piece of work, she caused an instant furore in the academic world. Shortly after her viva, M. was offered a job with the Prince’s Institute for Language and Literature, a renowned institution, so renowned that it was simply referred to as The Institute, and these days she was responsible for the digitisation of the literary archive that consisted of thousands of manuscripts, letters and scribbles, precious handwritten pages that she placed, one by one, under a scanner.

She often spent hours beside the machine, stooped over a blinding light that swept monotonously across the high ceilings.

The bus shuddered to a halt beside a stop. A few sports holdalls were waiting there, while on a nearby patch of grass a bunch of lads were pelting each other with snowballs. In their excitement they had failed to spot the bus, but the driver was patient; it was going to be a slow day anyway. The guys ran through the ankle-deep snow and got on, the last one still holding a snowball in his hand. He stared at the cold lump, bemused, as if he had only just realised how strange it was – solidified water. With some revulsion, he tossed the ball into the bin.

Occasionally she dreamt of a vacuum cleaner that sucked all the words off the pages. Or else the archive was a gigantic factory hall, filled with pallets of paper, the scanner a malicious entity that she had to feed and placate. The blink of an eye later, the machine had shrunk to the size of a matchbox – M. holding postage stamps between a pair of tweezers, her fingers trembling, her eyes burning with frustration.

In her dreams it was dark and still. In the office, she waded through a low humming noise. Big ventilators cooled the servers for the software that carried out mysterious calculations. The

programme transcribed the manuscripts word for word into printed text, but M. had to pitch in on a regular basis: when the handwriting was illegible, she had to decide, based on the context, which actual word had flowed from the author's pen.

It was painstaking work. The computer had to be trained, had to learn how to decipher the elegant swirls and the spidery scrawls, and to expedite the process M. had fallen back on her doctorate: could an algorithm be of assistance here? She was about to order a precious first edition of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* – 'It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits.' – when she realised that the solution was at her fingertips.

Websites routinely ask people to prove that they are human, by clicking on traffic lights or by typing a jumble of letters. Together with her colleague from IT, M. added the disputed words to the database, so an anonymous army of online users ended up doing the job for them. Every time you forgot your password or wanted to order a coat, you inadvertently helped The Institute.

Yet lots of gaps remained; some text blocks appeared to be shot through with white space. Not that this meant the loss of metres of worldclass literature. Writers were surprisingly similar to ordinary people. Every so often, M. discovered a stray line of poetry or a half-baked idea for a novel, but more often than not the letters and diaries were filled with the usual concerns. A chat with the guy next door, a leaking roof, a glut of Brussels sprouts, complaints about the weather – the pages were brimming with banality.

M. had no idea who would want to read all this homely language. A handful of desperate literature students perhaps, or a biographer in search of poetic eating habits?

It moved her too: authors who habitually moaned about a lack of money, awards and recognition spent much of their ink on the mundane. Apparently, life consisted of getting up and looking at the garden. Spotting a robin. Drinking coffee underneath an oak. Brushing your daughter's hair. Packing lunch boxes. Worrying about your sick aunt. Planning a trip, paying bills. Ticking off shopping lists and dead friends.

The bus was trundling along the water sports course. In summer, it was alive with colourful kayaks and rowing boats cutting rhythmically through the water. Now it was a wide, white line – the elongated basin looked like an endless margin.

Thick flakes obstructed the view. The driver sat hunched over his steering wheel, with the windscreen wipers squeaking across the glass. M. feared that he might give up; feared that, defeated by the snow, he would park the bus and tell the passengers to get off. But after a slight bend, the heavy snow abruptly eased into tiny powdery flakes and at the next stop M. watched the boys with the sports bags saunter towards a canteen.

A lone duck waddled across the wafer-thin ice. Suspended above the craquelure – a passing glimpse – was a volleyball net, icicles dangling from the mesh like glass daggers.

It was a matter of time before the first intrepid skater arrived.

M. thought about the doctor.

The new, young Dr Swart who bombarded her with medical jargon on the phone. He was not trying to be glib, he just seemed genuinely pleased to be able to use his cryptic language in real life for the first time. All those complex tongue twisters that, until recently, had been dead letters, entries in a textbook, now came to life. Down the line, M. heard him wave some scans around. Full of enthusiasm, he named the damaged deli meats: gyrus, Broca, suprachiasmatic, parietal and subarachnoid – a veritable feast for advanced Scrabble fans.

M. knew the terminology. The previous physician, Dr Steels, had also used the jargon in the early years. Later, he had moved away from it. 'They're hollow words. They may sound smart, but we actually know precious little about this grey matter. Naming a star doesn't bring the sky any closer.'

M. trusted Dr Steels, who was already getting on in years when he first entered her life. He was chubby for a doctor; he clearly carried a bit of extra weight, but he could be surprisingly sharp. She will never forget that time when he caught a falling needle between his fingers – a steel shimmer that he snatched from gravity – before matter-of-factly disinfecting it and snapping it onto the syringe.

Despite the many hours spent in his office, M. knew hardly anything about Dr Steels' personal life. That's weird when you think about it. GPs are familiar with every knackered bit of your body – from anal fissures to the cancer in your breast – and listen to your innermost feelings without batting an eyelid. Yet they themselves are sphinxes. Nobody ever enquires after their wellbeing. We don't want to know, don't want to learn that they, too, are fallible beings with aches and pains and domestic problems and graves where they leave fresh flowers every month. Doctors must remain mysteries, safes in which we store our secrets – they must be strangers to all things human.

Yet he must have let something slip once. M. knew he had a twin and that he liked scuba diving.

That first fact unnerved her. The idea of a doppelganger, of two identical bodies made her shudder; that kind of anomaly should not exist. M. realised all too well that her revulsion was based on lame horror films and myths about telepathy, yet at every consultation she had to brush the dread from her mind. How does it feel to know that you are a manufacturing defect, that you are not unique, but a spare part at best? How do you live, day in day out, with a mirror of flesh? And what if you murder your counterpart – the surplus other? Aren't you just robbing the world of yourself?

M. was always shocked by these morbid thoughts, but she found solace in the image of a doctor exploring the deep sea in a wetsuit. Beside the upholstered door of his office hung a large photo of a manta ray that M. could look at all day. The majestic sea creature, an elegant silhouette more than a fish, sliced blithely through the bright blue water. Sunlight dappled the image. On the bottom left, a tuft of coral waved quietly at the viewer, while on the right a Napoleon fish tried to escape the frame.

Dr Steels did not try to hide his pride when he admitted to taking the underwater photo: 'On holiday in Egypt. I go there to dive. I wouldn't call it a sport, but it's nice to be weightless for a while. To not see any people for a while.' The latter was clearly a slip of the tongue, and he gave M. a guilty look. But she understood his underwater dream. A world without gravity, without the abundance of flesh.

'Those bubbles, by the way, are from my diving mask.' He pointed to the specks of oxygen that fizzed through the crystal. 'It's nothing short of a miracle, breathing under water. As soon as I retire, I'm flying to Australia to explore the Great Barrier Reef. If it still exists by then.'

What had seemed like a distant proposition at the time had recently come to pass. Dr Steels was retiring, without any fuss, without a farewell reception. In fact, M. was slightly affronted by the casual handover of the file, by the final handshake which was no more than a handshake. Had she been expecting tears, a tight embrace? A final pearl of wisdom? A private phone number just in case?

For some time, a sliver of ice remained wedged in her heart, but now she had forgiven him. The thought of Dr Steels, floating through a water colour, laughing at funny fish, camera at the ready, made her smile and she wished him – no hard feelings – many long, sun-drenched years.

Only later did she realise, to her shame, that she did not know his first name. He was a doctor, a professional who patches up bodies. No more.

So now there was a new, young doctor. Dr Swart. When he introduced himself over the phone, M. wondered, in a fit of professional deformation, whether the doctors at the rest home were appointed alphabetically, and although his medical explanation was redundant – in her head, M. could pinpoint every affected lobe with an imaginary finger – she noticed that she was listening intently. More than his youthful enthusiasm, it was the timbre of his voice that captivated her. Timbre was the right word: warm, resonant – a breeze that made the skin between her shoulder blades tingle.

M. had been unable to utter the question. Too early. Too delicate. Too.

But they were about to meet each other for the first time.
Sunday, M. thought to herself. He works on a Sunday.
