

The Three and a Half Day Parent

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race, the birthday parties and then I realised I had been working when they had happened and now the pictures were gone I didn't even have the pseudo-memories to turn to.

Leaving that house was easy... you have to when it is sold. I took all my possessions with me; my records that she never liked, my books that she never read, and my clothes that she never chose and of course not forgetting the knife, fork and plate. The house was so desolate I kind of wished I did eat puddings, just to have found dignity in possessing and packing up a spoon. As I left the garden I turned around and took one last look above the gate. I could still see her in summer, playing with our son in the garden, hiding the action man in the plants that never grew and it was so real it scared me, like they were still there. My reverie was interrupted by the next door neighbour who pulled up in his car with his music blaring, true to form. He slammed his door so everybody could hear him and stared at me as he walked past.

'Off then are you?'

'Yep.'

'Right you are then.' And off he walked, slamming the back door behind him so his girlfriend knew he was back. I felt completely insignificant, as if forced behind a two way mirror in which you are only ever able to see out. For the first time in my life I was consciously aware of how nothing really matters and how ridiculous it all is. I also realised that I was a fool if I expected compassion off a neighbour when it is hard to even find this in friends. I put my stuff into the car, feeling genuinely thankful that I hadn't had to lug any heavy items down the stairs and prepared to find somewhere else to temporarily live. Perhaps Tracey Emin's tent is up for sale?

Just as I started up the engine my neighbour came crashing back through his gate, spreading himself across the bonnet of the car like I was under arrest. Too many re-runs of *Starsky and Hutch* on Sky are to blame.

Laurence Llewelyn Bowen is to marriage what salt is to a slug

I gladly let her have the lot. I didn't need reminders; it was easier that way. I told her to come around while I was out and to take everything, and I meant, everything. When I returned there was nothing left, she had done exactly what I had asked. She was always good to the word and I suspect that was one of the problems of our relationship.

Upon the fitted kitchen worktop (which she surprisingly had not dismantled) was one knife, one fork, one cup and one plate. She didn't leave a spoon. She knew I hated spoons, it meant puddings and ice cream and I wasn't into all that.

The items were arranged neatly on the worktop suggesting that a meal was on the way. There was no meal on the way but at least the cooker was still there. She hated that cooker and always complained that it only ever burnt the tops of pies whilst somehow failing to defrost its contents. I suppose I kind of felt like that cooker now, which I guess makes her the pie.

By the food was a note telling me she had taken everything. Even upon splitting up she failed to recognise me as a competent human being, doubting that I would not notice the sudden emptiness of the house or that I may have forgotten. Perhaps she thought I was in some kind of denial and would pretend that none of this was happening.

The note made me sad because she had even taken the pad and the pen with her, leaving a solitary sheet with scribble. She hadn't even bothered to write neatly. The note was one of those 'I'm not a racist but...' because it said she still loved me and then in the next sentence explained she had to go. She also said she had found someone else, someone who could put up shelves straight and didn't lose their drill. I attribute her no blame for giving into such temptation. I reserve that for the influx of home decoration

programmes which have invaded the living room. Our marriage never stood a chance once the leather panted Llewelyn Bowen came on the scene.

I decided to throw the note in the bin because if I didn't I would only keep reading it over and over again. However I ended up keeping the note. My change of heart was not due to prosperity but because she had taken the bin as well. It was only one of those £5.99 plastic ones. It seems strange how love boils down to such ridiculous things.

I decided to make myself a coffee when I realised the kettle had gone as well. The Nescafé had followed in hot pursuit. I laughed, she was priceless, and then thought one last fuck would have been nice. Then I started to cry at our selfishness and how my sexual needs were no different to her uses for a £5.99 plastic bin. It was no wonder we were splitting up.

At least she had left me the fridge, although that was something else she never liked. She said it used to make a whining noise and it felt like there were people screaming in her head. I could never hear it. It wasn't that I didn't believe her it was just after a ten hour shift of operating machines I couldn't hear anything else. In fact I was envious that she could even find metaphors within her torture. I opened the fridge to take a cold glass from the Brita water filter jug to quench my thirst, but that had gone also. It obviously didn't make a whining noise and now she had a new man it was his digestive system that must be purified if he is to remain healthy and rectify the shelves.

I decided to risk my health and put faith in the £453 yearly water rates I paid without complaint - and took a glass from the tap; cautiously allowing it to run for two minutes first. I was quickly learning not to take anything for granted and words of wisdom from my boss started to flood into my mind after years of blocking them out. 'When you assume you make an ASS out of U and ME.'

The water looked clear enough. I went to sit down, taking my first gulp of a wasted potential that could so easily have been

purified or coffee in another life. Sadness was everywhere I looked. Sadness was also everywhere that I fell, which is exactly what happened when I crashed to the ground as the seat and dining table was no longer there.

My sole cup smashed, forcing its contents onto the floor. Instantaneously the clear liquid streamed into a line and headed for my knees as if still determined to enter my body. I had to admire its perseverance, the way it needed to find a place to rest as well. Then I started to laugh, although I think this was to disguise the fact that I was really crying. She was right. I am stupid, I don't take any notice. Even now I take it for granted that the chairs are still there when my eyes so clearly prove that they are not.

I never thought I was a bad person but perhaps I am. I wondered if she would find this all funny if she could see me now, would she tell me to watch the broken cup or had we entered that stage of a relationship where clumsy becomes stupid and forgetful becomes inconsiderate? There was no point dwelling on it too much as the point was, we didn't have a relationship, and the sooner I realised this the quicker I would stop breaking cups. There was one positive. I didn't need to go out and buy a mop because I had only spilt water and even though it hadn't been purified it wasn't going to stain the carpet.

I realised that now she had freed me of so many things I should remain naked for a little longer. In the future I would invest in paper plates and plastic cups and never worry again about buying wash-basins that match the wallpaper, or wood over chrome breadbins. I may even invest in paper pants. From now on I would only buy essential items like a fast boil kettle, an electric toothbrush, and a Brita water purifier.

I looked at the walls for comfort now I had no wife to turn to and I realised how bare they were. That she had taken all the pictures of our son with her. Was it not enough that she had him everyday without looking at pictures as well? Obviously not. I missed those pictures of my son, stills from his life. The school

Dad likes whiskey but he hasn't got his nipples pierced. I consider explaining that he requires the whiskey for a different type of pain, but they are too young to understand. Besides it's not answers that they seek but the opportunity for further questions.

They remain quiet for a short spell imagining and digesting all that they have learnt, their concentration occasionally lapsing with an odd push or kick to the other's legs. In their world a bruise on the shin is like a token of love, a sign of respect, recognition of the other's existence.

Soon one chirp's up, 'I want my willy pierced when I'm older' which is followed by the inevitable, 'have you got your willy pierced?'

I sigh 'No' whilst imagining what it would be like, how much it would cost, and where I would get it done. I have no intention of drawing attention to my genitals just as I have no intention of drawing attention to my life.

'Does it hurt?'

'What?'

'Willy piercing.'

'I don't know.'

'Haven't you got any friends with their willy pierced?'

'No.'

They look rather disappointed at this, and I feel as if I have kind of let them down.

'Do you think it would hurt?'

'What do you think?'

'I don't know,' they giggle, but they do.

'Of course it bloody hurts.'

'Do you think people with their willy pierced drink whiskey?'

'Probably.'

A woman pushing a pram which looks more expensive than my car grimaces at our conversation. I can tell by the inoffensive floral patterns she has chosen to cover her child in, that penis mutilation is not her thing. I smile back towards her and tell the kids it's time

'I've still got your drill,' he begins, 'I borrowed it off your wife, ex-wife.'

I am quite shocked that she hasn't been around to collect it and figure that it must simply be because it is a smaller version than the one her new partner has got and so she no longer has use for it.

'It's okay, you can keep it...,' but he interrupts, 'I know I can, you're wife said so. The problem is there are some drill bits missing. Have you got them?'

At first I think he is joking then I remember that this is not the kind of trait which is synonymous with his personality.

'They're in the garage,' I sigh, 'don't worry its unlocked.'

'Do you know whereabouts?'

'On the top shelf of the left wall next to some old tins of paint.'

'Can I have the paint as well?'

'Yes.'

'What colour is it?'

It is at this point I feel myself starting to get really angry but just when I think I am going to shout I start to laugh. I have about as much control over my emotions as I do with my life. Fortunately it is enough to scare my neighbour off, ex-neighbour as I finally say goodbye to this street.

Park life

‘Did it hurt when you had your eyebrow pierced?’

‘No.’

‘Bet it did.’

‘It didn’t.’

‘Not just a little bit?’

‘Well perhaps a little.’

‘So it did hurt then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why lie about it then?’

The word has spread far and yonder that a free babysitter is available and so I am looking after my friend’s two boys. They are very clued up and inquisitive yet uninterested in the park.

‘Have you ever had your nose pierced?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought only punks had their nose pierced?’

‘You’ve a lot to learn.’

‘Were you a punk when you had it pierced?’

‘No.’

‘Well why did you have it done then?’

It’s hard enough convincing yourself you have made an individual statement without justifying it to a child. They don’t buy any of it such is the purity of their minds.

‘Have you had your ear pierced?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does that hurt?’

‘A little.’

‘Does it hurt as much as your nose?’

‘Or your eyebrow?’ adds his brother.

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘How sure?’

‘Very. It can hurt if you have the top of your ear pierced.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’ve got small bones in your ear and it’s more sensitive at the top.’

‘You haven’t got bones in your ear.’

‘You have.’

‘Haven’t.’

‘Have.’

‘How do you know you have?’

‘I just do.’

‘My dad says that whenever I ask him how he knows stuff.’

‘Well we did go to the same school.’

‘I want my ear pierced when I’m older.’

‘So do I,’ agrees his brother before adding, ‘and I want my nipple pierced as well.’

‘That really hurts,’ I point out.

‘Why have you got your nipple pierced?’

‘No.’

‘Well how do you know it hurts?’

‘I just do.’

‘See you said it again.’

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s okay. Anyway how do you know it hurts?’

‘Because.’

‘Because what?’

‘Because I know someone who had their nipple pierced and they stretched it and it bled when the needle was inserted.’

‘Wow.’

‘Wow,’ says the other kid as well.

‘Was it lots of blood?’

‘I don’t know, I wasn’t there.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He went and had a few whiskeys.’

They both smile as if they understand and then one says his

The kids scream.

I start to laugh.

I hate couples who spend the whole afternoon snogging in parks.

‘Motherfucker,’ shouts the girl, whose lip I think is bleeding although it may be the latest ‘must have’ colour in lipstick.

‘You and your motherfucking kids.’

‘They’re not mine,’ I retort.

‘We’re not his,’ join in the kids, with what sounds more like relief than pride.

She gathers herself together, slightly ashamed at losing it in front of her partner and drags him to another part of the park.

‘Do you think he’s got his willy pierced?’ asks one of the kids.

‘I don’t know, you better ask.’

‘Have you got your willy pierced?’ shouts one of the boys.

‘And have you got your woman’s willy pierced?’ inquires the other.

But they are not listening. They stomp steadily away; probably more aware of the value of contraception now they have seen the truth about kids. Then they stop and start to kiss under a tree.

‘Kids, have you heard of the African termite?’

One says yes and one says no.

‘Well their life is worse than ours.’

‘Because they haven’t got Nintendo?’

‘Partly, yes. Anyway they pass up and down tunnels all day on their way to the queen termite, whose job it is to give birth all the time until she dies.’

‘Ur, that’s disgusting.’

‘Yeah, I’m glad that our Queen doesn’t do that.’

‘Me too, anyway, when they get to the queen termite they exchange saliva. She can tell by their saliva what kind of function they perform in the hive, and then knows what type of termite to give birth to next. This way the hive will always have the correct amount of workers, soldiers, etc.’

to move on. Fortunately children are not ones to dwell and the conversation is forgotten when I mention a game of footy.

‘But we’ve got no net.’

‘We can make one.’

‘Have I got to take my top off?’

‘Not if you don’t want to.’

‘I don’t want to’, he smugly informs before adding, ‘my dad always takes his off for us.’

Freezing for children is just one of the many tortures an adult must endure in a perverse logic which equates one person’s suffering as another’s joy.

They stare at me until I remove the clothing before giving each other a high five. They have no idea how to celebrate gracefully, but that’s the beauty of being a child.

I shake my head, trying to remain motivated despite realising that I have lost this game before we have even started.

‘What about the other post?’

‘Are you going to have to take your T-shirt off?’ inquires the other brother, as if this is the only thing that will do.

‘No. We can use the sandwich bag.’

‘But what if the sandwiches get crushed.’

‘They won’t.’

‘How do you know they won’t?’

‘Because they won’t.’

‘What if they do?’

‘Look, will you just stop moaning and worrying about things. You’re like a couple of old women.’

Two women walking past stare across at me. They are not old but they are women, and so representative of the later category. I want to chase after them and apologise by explaining the flaws of language and that I didn’t mean what I said but something tells me this is an excuse they are already familiar with. Instead I decide to stick with the just as difficult task of trying to keep a couple of kids happy.

‘Can we use one of your socks as a post instead?’

‘NO. We use the sandwich bag or I’m taking you home.’

‘You can’t because our parents aren’t back yet.’

‘This is your last chance. Do you want to play football or not?’

They nod their heads and it seems to work. The minute you end the conversation with a dismissive unarguable point they accept it. I figure I must sound like their dad. Maybe when he’s had a whiskey and just wants to rest.

‘Where are we gonna make the goals?’

I look out at the masses of fields in front of me and wonder if they are taking the piss. They are not taking the piss they are waiting for an answer. I guess that’s how it works in their house.

‘Over there,’ I say, pointing in the direction of a bin which has more rubbish around it than in it.

They ponder for a few seconds before pointing in the opposite direction. ‘Can’t we play over there instead?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘Because.’

‘Because what?’

‘Because I fucking said so.’

An old man walking his dog turns around and shakes his head.

‘You swore,’ says one kid

‘I know.’

‘You’re not meant to swear.’

‘And you’re not meant to question everything I say. Can’t I just be the parent for once and you the child?’

‘Okay,’ they agree, as if I have finally made a reasonable request that doesn’t seem to be too far fetched. ‘Where are we playing?’

‘Straight ahead.’

‘What, near that couple?’

‘Yes. Near that couple.’

‘But the ball might hit them.’

‘I know.’

‘But they might get angry.’

‘I know. I want to wake them from their calmed state.’

The kids laugh and walk ahead. Now that they know that I swear I’m not so bad.

‘Do we get an extra goal if we hit them,’ one eagerly enquires, whilst the more cautious of the two wants confirmation that if we do I will take all the blame. I decide not to reassure him until we have found the right spot.

The match starts and one of the kids takes a swipe at my ankle even though the ball is not around, manipulating situations to test the boundaries as only a child can. He’s not laughing though when I leg him up, preventing an easy goal whilst sending him head first into some shit. He doesn’t look too happy although his brother can’t stop laughing.

‘I wish your son was here.’

‘So do I,’ I point out.

‘It would be two-a-side then and a bit more fairer. You’re not very good on your own.’

‘Can’t you ring him?’ asks the more resourceful brother.

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he’s with his mum.’

‘Doesn’t she like people ringing him? My mum doesn’t mind my friends ringing me but I’m not allowed to ring them.’

‘Look he’s probably doing something with her.’

‘Yeah, like shopping.’

‘Does he like being with his mum?’

‘I think so.’

‘Do you think he prefers you or his mum?’

It is at this point that I release a thunderbolt that shoots into the imaginary top corner of the net and thuds against the back of some young lovers’ heads.

The girl screams.

Her partner screams.

makes them laugh and so they scatter the rest of the packet in the hope of seeing a repeat performance.

After much flapping, wincing and laughing I toss one a left over chunk of my veggy ham sandwich. It is eagerly greeted and fought over, although only the bread is consumed and the ham spat out. Another less picky goose inspects the processed meat substitute before flying off.

The kids find this hilarious and their eyes sparkle as they explain, 'these geese are not vegetarian, they like proper ham.'

Although I feel a bit annoyed by the geese because I was under no obligation to share my food, I try to hide my anger. I don't know who the cheeky bastards think they are. But the kids won't let this go and so I endure ten minutes of insults which only ends when I hand them a Jaffa Cake.

'Can you get vegetarian Jaffa Cakes?'

'Shut it,' I tell them, wishing we had never stopped playing football.

The geese start to make their funny noises again and seem to be interested in the new food but the kids aren't as keen to share this time. One of them tells me that he asks his dad for Jaffa Cakes but he never gets them. The geese aren't put off though and have become accustomed to getting their own way over the years. One raises its wings above its head like a performing circus animal, but it has little chance with these Jaffa deprived kids.

Eventually, and through perseverance rather than compassion, a goose is rewarded with a corner of a Jaffa Cake. I note that it is thrown at, rather than to the goose, and this must be their equivalent to kicking a ball at a young couple petting.

'Is there anything else?'

I look in the bag and pull out a cheese and onion roll which after one small bite they launch into the pond so that it sinks before the geese can eat it, obviously feeling bitter that they parted with their last chunk of Jaffa Cake. As they sit and curse the birds I wonder what it must be like to be a fish carefully swimming around, trying

The kids seem disgusted.

'If I spat on the floor would a queen termite know what school I went to and what job I was going to get?'

'Maybe.'

'That's cool.' Then they both start to spit on the floor.

'Do termites have willies?'

'I don't know.'

'How come you know loads about spit and saliva and termites but you don't even know if they have willies?'

'I don't know.'

'What would happen if the queen termite was disabled?' but before I can respond to this question the other has had a revelation.

'Hey imagine if a Nottingham women gave birth to loads of ace footballers and they all played for Forest. That would be wicked.'

But his brother is more reasoned than his fellow sibling and points out, 'Man. U would just buy them all.'

It is only when conversation starts and ends with football; taking love, kissing and African termites along its circuit, that the world does not seem so complicated but inextricably linked.

'I've got fizzy leg.'

'What's fizzy leg?' I enquire.

'It's when your leg gets fizzy.'

'You mean pins and needles?'

They both stare at me and start to laugh. I decide this conversation is not worth pursuing and try to tempt them from it with the lure of sandwiches.

'Are you ready for lunch?'

'Did the sandwiches get battered?'

'No, they didn't get battered.'

'What are they?'

'Veggie ham and tomato sauce.'

'But I'm not a vegetarian.'

'Well I am.'

'What's veggie ham anyway?'

‘Its ham that’s not made out of pigs.’
‘So it’s not ham then.’
‘No.’
‘Well why call it veggie ham then?’ joins in the brother.
‘Because it’s for vegetarians and it’s processed to look like ham.’
‘But why would a vegetarian want to eat something that looked like ham? Why don’t they just eat it if they like what it looks like?’
There is no point arguing with kids when they are right.
‘Does it taste like ham?’
‘Yes.’
‘How can you be a vegetarian if you’ve tasted ham?’
‘Because I wasn’t always one.’
‘Why change then?’
‘Because I wanted to.’
‘But why?’
‘Because.’
‘Because what?’
‘Look I’ve been a vegetarian since I was about five.’
‘How old are you?’
‘Twenty eight.’
‘I know someone that’s 28. My uncle Rob.’
‘Do you want the veggie ham or not?’
‘I suppose,’ they both say.
‘Is there anything else?’
‘Crisps.’
‘What sort?’
‘Walkers.’
‘Walkers what?’
‘French Fries.’
‘Cool, what flavour?’
‘Worcester Sauce.’
‘Ace.’
Once the food has been sanctioned I ask them where they want

to sit. Both look around the park before shrugging their shoulders. As always I must make a decision of sorts.

‘Do you mind if we sit on the bench near the ducks?’

‘What ducks?’ they ask.

‘Those ducks,’ I sigh.

‘They’re not ducks,’ begins one, ‘they’re...’

‘Geese,’ finishes his brother.

I’m not 100% sure that they are correct but I don’t care enough to argue.

Before the silver foil containing the sandwiches has been discarded the geese are upon us, making whatever noise it is that geese make. This makes the kids scream which in turn is mimicked by the geese in what could be described as a conversation of sorts. I can feel a headache coming on but soon the noise dies down. One of the kids has thrown the geese his crusts as a kind of peace offering.

I am tempted to tell them that this is the best part of the bread but I’m not too sure that it is. It’s just something I was told so many times as a child that I just accepted it as truth.

When I suggest giving the geese some French Fries crisps they look a little apprehensive. I figure that this is because it is their favourite and they don’t want to share, but instead they reveal an uncharacteristic caring side to their personality.

‘Will they choke on it?’

‘No.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I’ve given them crisps before.’

‘Were they French Fries?’

‘No, Wotsits.’

The brothers both look at each other, and I can tell by the way they stop munching that there is nothing in the world as diverse as different brands of crisps. Fortunately I am spared a comparative analysis as a goose downs the French Fries in one, but not I might add without a wince and an erratic flapping of its wings. This

‘You look very smart, been to a job interview?’

‘I’m too young to work.’

‘I feel the same way, and I’m old enough.’

‘I know,’ the boy replied before he added, ‘but you don’t work anyway.’

‘How do you know?’ I asked

‘I’ve seen ya pick ya kid up from school. He’s in my mate’s class.’

I don’t think he was having a pop, I think it was more of a social observation. Keen to detract him from my employment history I continued my investigation into his smart attire to which he curtly replied, ‘I’ve bin ta court ta stop me dad from seeing me.’

At this point his mother decided to join in the conversation by placing her hand firmly on his leg, just above where the knee cap bends, a reward perhaps for what she probably classed as loyalty. She had a large hand and thin fingers, combined I imagine they made a useful team, adaptable and able to get to grips with any situation.

I just looked at the kid and smiled. Sometimes that’s all you can do. I considered pulling at his ear or ruffling his hair but decided against it. I figured if I made any move in his direction his mother’s hand would spring from his leg and pull me down to the ground. I didn’t need that and he didn’t need that, besides this may be the most affection he has had all week. It’s weird how a kid so young can behave so old.

I decided to break the silence again. There’s something wrong when a child just sits quiet on a bus looking straight ahead without any inclination for distraction.

‘Do you like football?’

‘My dad does.’

‘Who does he support?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you play football?’

‘Sometimes.’

not to bump into other fish when from nowhere a cheese and onion roll comes floating down. It must be pretty surreal but more frighteningly is the realisation that the same could one day happen to me, that a massive cheese and onion roll could come flying out of space and hit me on the head. If this seems unlikely then put yourself momentarily in the position of the fish...

‘Right its time to go.’

‘But we haven’t spat on the fish yet?’

‘What do you mean you haven’t spat on the fish yet?’

They stare at me like I have just said the most stupid thing in the world.

‘We just want to spit on them.’

‘Only for a minute,’ reasons the older brother.

‘Does your dad know that you do that?’

‘Yeah, but he pretends he can’t see us. So, can we?’

‘No you can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘Must I quantify every single thing?’

‘What does quantify mean?’

‘It means you can’t spit on the fucking fish, now come on we’re going home.’

When I return the children their dad asks what they have been up to.

‘We threw a cheese and onion roll at some fish and kicked a football at someone kissing and he swore.’

‘Good, anything else?’

‘No... Dad?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t ever want to be a vegetarian...like him.’

‘Well, you don’t have to be.’

‘Good.’

‘Dad...’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know anyone with their willy pierced?’

My friend looks at me but has known me long enough to know that there is no point asking. Instead he thanks me for looking after them and I tell him it’s no problem.

The three and a half day parent

People say that having children hinders your life, this is not exactly true. What it does hinder is your drinking, which I suppose for some is pretty much the same thing. The hangovers become unbearable when the youngest is screaming which is why so many parents take up less physiological pursuits, like computer games, home decoration, and shopping for ingredients to make the latest Jamie Oliver recipe - all of which, unintentionally, encourage an early night’s sleep. Fortunately I am a split-parent and so am spared such unimaginative forms of distraction. For three and a half days I have my son and ‘do stuff’ and for the other three and a half days I ‘do drink’. I find this contrast serves my needs well.

We, the ‘ex’ and I, agreed upon equal access which is a little bit more than we agreed upon whilst together. Neither of us wanted the indignity of being a weekend parent. We considered using our child as a means of emotionally blackmailing the other but decided against it as it took up too much energy. He’ll probably hold it against us when he’s older given that parental squabbling is the common experience of most of his friends, but I’m sure he’ll get over it. The beauty of this system is he is cherished by which ever parent he is with, and compensation for the other comes in the form of added free time, often spent in the company of the local barman.

To some extent I would say that split-parenting is the way forward. It works for me in a way that marriage didn’t. Besides, nobody I know has ever remained married and so perhaps future generations should start with split parenting the minute their child is born. This may seem negative, but then that which is closest to ‘truth’ often is. Take an incident that happened this morning. I was in a good mood because it was my day to pick him up from school and so in my last few hours of solitude I decided to travel in to town. Directly in front of me on the bus were a small kid and his mum. The kid was remarkably well dressed and so I thought I would commend him on his appearance.

to do in its life than I, and in a perverse way that made me feel slightly better. As it closed its eyes I considered switching on my windscreen wipers but I figured this would only serve as a fan and would hardly move it. Besides, it wasn't everyday you got to make eye contact with a *Papio hamadryas* and so was worth the study. I was struck by its dog-like muzzle; you could see why they didn't need knives and forks. It reminded me of the long slender barrel of a gun and I felt slightly relieved that if it fired, its bullets would only be seeds, roots and insects, as for a primate it had a pretty unadventurous diet.

'Dad he's still there.'

'I know son. Everyone knows. Maybe that's why he's doing it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, perhaps he is showing off. Or maybe he likes the feel of cars. Stuck up in the trees with all those cutting branches and enveloping leaves of green must get pretty depressing. Maybe he's bored of all that nature shit and wants a nice smoothly finished bonnet to perch his smoothly finished rump on for a change. Sound reasonable to you?'

'I suppose so,' he replied.

'Well now you know a bit more about Baboons son.' I felt proud that I had performed my parental duties by handing down some irrelevant knowledge I could convince him would be useful in future years. The day was turning out to be a success.

'Can we see the lions? I've seen enough of the baboon. I'm glad my bum isn't red.'

'Maybe he's not glad his bum is red and that's why he's sticking it in our faces. So we can feel his pain. He may be a protester baboon.'

'I didn't know there was such thing as protester baboons.'

'Well you do now son.'

I revved the engine a bit to indicate that it was time to move but it merely rocked the baboon to a comforting sleep. I wondered what it was dreaming about and if it had nightmares, did they

'I bet you'll be glad to get out those clothes when you get home and put on some...'

It was at this point his mother interrupted.

'Why are you so fucking obsessed with his clothes? Are you a pervert or something?'

'I was just...'

'Don't fucking anything.'

As she spoke I could see her knuckles whitening where they were gripping her child's leg. I decided to get off the bus a few stops early, figuring the walk and the fresh air would do me some good. As the bus drove off the woman gave me the finger, whilst her son continued to stare off into the distance.

I am glad that my former wife and I had managed to resolve things amicably, that our son didn't have to put on matching shirt and trousers and inform strangers on buses that he had been to court to stop his dad from seeing him. I liked our arrangement: three and a half days of drinking and then three and a half of Nintendo, walks, football, *Shrek*, *crazy-bones*, *Pokemon* and all the rest. The knowledge that I will always be able to pick him up at the same time on the same day each week enables me to get through the week as a Friday night once had. It is a very simple arrangement that most find hard to agree on.

I guess because of this I feel like the luckiest man alive, like I have been given a second chance and I wish other parents would allow themselves to feel the same as well, to gain from splitting up rather than putting each other through unnecessary pain. Take tonight for instance. My son and I drove to Coventry to see stock car racing because he likes to hear bangs and loud noise. If it wasn't for split parenting I would probably be slumped in front of the TV, content to embroil myself in the narrative of fictional characters rather than create a story of my own. I'd never have had the energy or inclination to discover this 'place' and its magical sect. This gloriously vile smelly pit where cars snarl and

their owners roar and the food bars fail to cater for vegetarians. The mechanical madness offers a temporary reprieve from the monotony of human conversation whilst the exhaust fumes itch at the eyes as if punishment for witnessing the earlier misery of other people's lives. I'd never have discovered such places if it had not been for the constant need to entertain my son.

I would not have discovered the stock car racing circuit either if I were a non-parent because my friends would have immediately taken the piss on any suggestion to come here. If I was still married then neither of us would have been bothered because routine wears you down. It beats you into a pulp where pennies are constantly counted and freedom can only be found in an hour's soak in the bath. It is for this reason I believe split parenting is the way forward. It allows a balancing of needs as well as expanding horizons and perhaps most importantly, an awareness of the fragility of time.

When we got home that evening I tucked him up in bed and kissed him on the line of freckles that sometimes get hidden beneath his hairline. One day he'll be a good looker, just like his mum.

'What football team do I support?'

'Why are you asking me a stupid question for?'

'Because sometimes dads need a stupid answer. Now what team do I support?'

He looks at me and mumbles under his breath, 'Derby'.

'What did you say?' I ask in mock horror, whilst adjusting my fingers in preparation for a tickle.

'Forest,' he laughs, 'you support Forest, and so do I.'

Hamadryas Baboons and Lisa Lashes

I took my son to Windsor Safari park once. A baboon climbed on to the bonnet of my car and just sat there supinely, as if it was its rightful place. My son laughed whilst the baboon looked upwards, unaware. I lit a cigarette and my son started to cough so I extinguished it. It was a clear stakeout and I had all the time in the world although it looked as if the *Papio hamadryas* was in no rush either. Given that the average life span of a baboon in captivity is around thirty-seven years it could potentially be a long wait. I figured now was a good time to think of a more plausible reason for returning our son at potentially forty-five years old, than the following morning as originally agreed.

My son asked me what the baboon was doing and I told him; 'sitting on my bonnet'. He wasn't happy with the answer and asked why he was sitting on the bonnet. I explained I didn't know and that it was feasible it was simply a primate bred to sit. He didn't seem too impressed with that either so I explained about its ischial callosities, or leathery sitting pads, which allow the baboon to not only sit, but sleep upright as well. My son seemed sceptical of my parental omnipotence and so I applied simple logic, explaining that the average baboon weighed between 14-40 kg and therefore was glad to rest its muscular frame. Typically he asked; if this was the case then why didn't elephants sit down more often, before smugly looking upwards. Taking a momentary pause I explained that if elephants sat down they probably wouldn't be able to get back up again. Returning his smug look it was finally my chance to look upwards, but he turned away. Probably trying to find another way to catch his father out, given as this was his favourite past time.

During this discussion the baboon had reclined on to my windscreen as if enjoying a rare British sun. Either that or it was trying to listen in on our conversation. I think the baboon had less

car behind. It really had been one of those days and I just wish I had changed places. I could be surrounded by sixty friends all grooming my hair and offering up sex now.

In court the moral sermon left the judge flustered. He squeezed every last drop of air out of his body as if keeping it would contaminate him in some way. It left his face red and for one small moment all I could see was the baboon's arse. Then he showed a photograph of the decapitated animal to the jury. They sighed, and for a brisk moment it sounded comforting, like a wave crashing against sand. For such cruelty I was banned for life from zoos, and pet shops, and sentenced to a month's hard labour. He did not believe in the concept of accident; a sentiment applauded by the jury. As they led me away I realised I had served twenty-eight years on this planet and never paid my council tax late, never had a fight or tried to spin my gas meter the opposite way around. I kill one baboon that's off his tree and I am a criminal.

involve its principle enemy, the leopard, or did such fears come symbolically disguised like our own?

'Please move?' I politely requested, taking greater care with tone of voice than with content of words.

'He's a stubborn bastard.'

'You swore.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's alright. Mum swears as well.' I was glad our bad habits were equilateral.

'How do you know it's a he?'

'Because females grow to roughly twenty-five pounds which is half the weight of the male. Besides he has a silver grey mane running from his shoulders which means he is a mature male. Hey, that means he could be around thirty, which means we might get out of here before you're fifteen.'

My son scratched his nose, warning me of imminent confusion. Perhaps he had forgotten that baboons' average age of death was thirty-seven and hence the long wait to get him off the car, but it was something more specific that was working in his head.

'Dad, don't you ever get fat female baboons?'

I didn't really want to get into this one and so I lit a cigarette. He knew that always meant I was relaxing and didn't want to be disturbed. Instead he coughed again, which was his way of conveying he enjoyed breathing, and so once more I extinguished the cigarette. You literally give up everything for your kids. I decided to hedge my frustration back at the baboon.

'Come on there's other cars too,' I reasoned, but he wasn't listening. He obviously had a penchant for the Nissan Primera.

I started to laugh.

'Why are you laughing dad?'

'Because there's a baboon on my car and he won't get off.'

'Maybe he doesn't want to get off like you said.'

'Maybe.'

I decided to put on a little music and selected hard house over

chill-out. I pumped up the volume and my son started to laugh and the baboon made a funny noise and then another baboon came and sat on my bonnet. I started to become a little worried now as I knew baboons generally travelled in groups of 60 and these groups usually made up a troop of around 200. Fortunately rationale kicked in and I realised that there were probably about ten *Papio hamadryas* in the safari. They could probably just about all fit on.

I took the Lashes tape out of the slot, as I didn't want to encourage further conviviality especially as the tempo had quickened and was about to peak with the track *Luckin' Good*. I replaced it with the chill-out one instead, something less evocative. Instantly the other baboon got off, smearing its arse across the windscreen before scurrying off on all fours.

'I guess we can confirm that as a general rule, baboons prefer Lisa Lashes.'

My son did not look any more enlightened by the fact and seemed more preoccupied with whether the lions would like Lisa Lashes and so I gently started to move forward.

Now I never meant to kill the baboon, I swear. But he just wouldn't get down and we had gone past the stage of rational negotiation. I simply revved my engine and shook him about, but nothing happened. Its only function was to bob its arse up and down in front of my eyes like a hypnotic yo-yo. I thought of Camus in *The Outsider* and how the sun had got to him, leading to murder. You can get used to anything in life. This baboon had clearly had enough of baboon life. It was sick of all the grooming that socially united the group. Picking nits and fleas out of each other's hair was not relaxing and uniting as anthropologists had claimed, but boring! The lack of want was another casuistic misconception. It was sick of the pressure that came with being the dominant gender. It wasn't such a utopia having exclusive breeding rights to females and being able to monitor and control their every move. He just wanted to lie in the sun, on my bonnet, and this car was his ticket out of here.

Perhaps I should have given him the keys and traded places? I don't think anybody would have noticed and as long as my son was returned home on time it wouldn't bother his mother. Besides our cultures are synonymous; large dominant males rule the troops and are responsible for diffusing fractious members and protecting the colony from predators. By our system, size is replaced with suits.

I wasn't going that fast, probably averaging twenty-five mph, just enough to send a small breeze blowing into the baboon's face. I must admit he did look pretty cool and the females seemed impressed. It put equivalent mating rituals to shame. Suddenly my son shouted out, 'Dad it's the lions, put on your Lisa Lashes tape.' The baboon must've heard because it jumped off the bonnet and got its tail caught in the grill. By the time I had braked it had already been decapitated.

My son started to cry and I started to smoke and this time he didn't cough. I tried to explain to him that it was fate; that some species of baboon had evolved a stump rather than a tail and it was just the way things are. This did not placate him and I wondered which story his mother would prefer if she had a choice? That I didn't return him until he was forty-five because I had to wait for a baboon to die or that he had witnessed his father decapitate a *Papio hamadryas*? As with this particularly unlucky species of baboon, I couldn't win. So I drove off from the scene of the crime and hoped the lions would take their role in the evolutionary ladder and dispose of the evidence.

On my return to civilised society I was greeted by my own evolutionary king predator; the police. They shook their heads from side to side and felt the need to lecture before my arrest, extracting morality at any given opportunity as if it was some preordained right. They told me that they personally detested cowards like me who fled from the scene of the crime instead of facing up to my responsibilities. They told me there were witnesses and I didn't know if they were referring to the elephants or the giraffes or the

One year I bought them all a present, which I smashed before wrapping it up. When they opened the presents they just stared at me like I was a fool. 'It's broke mister,' said one. 'You owe us a new one,' said another. After a few hours one of them asked me if it could be fixed and with a little bit of glue I made the necessary repair. On seeing this, the other kids followed by example and after four hours I had rebuilt all the presents. All the kids jumped on me at once and said it was the best presents they had ever had. It made me feel a little sad. Then they jumped on them and smashed them into a thousand pieces and threw them in the garden with the rest.

My friend tells me that he has to get angry more. I ask him why, and he goes all shy. His wife walks into the room and shouts at him for not defending himself. He tells me that he has issues and ambitions and he is going to start putting his dreams in to action. I don't actually think he knows what he is saying but I go along with him because he is married to a therapist and he doesn't need shit from me as well. He tells me that you have to be positive in life. That it doesn't matter what happens to you its how you deal with it that matters. Later when I am drinking a cup of tea he asks me if it is half-full or half empty. I just look at him and say 'cold'.

My friend's wife is constantly rediscovering herself through expensive self-help books and philosophy which rather than bringing enlightenment often brings confusion. This is because she reads so many books without pausing that none have time to settle and grow. This week his wife is reading a book about reincarnation. She wants to get in touch with her previous lives. She believes that she was a soldier in 1485 and was responsible for the battle of Bosworth. I tell her that's a big burden to carry on her shoulders and she informs me it wouldn't be so big if her husband lent her some support. I figure he can't whilst he is making dinner for more children than I have fingers, but allow her to continue. She tells me that in a past life my friend caused a blockage in heaven so great that the new souls couldn't be born as the old souls passed through.

Never marry a therapist or have more kids than fingers

There is nothing I love more than visiting my friend when I have a hangover because whenever I see his life, mine feels instantaneously better. He is married to a therapist and has more kids than I have fingers. Whenever I see him he pulls me to one side and gives me advice, 'Never marry a therapist, you can't do anything.' Other times he will pull me to one side and say, 'Never have loads of kids, you can't do anything.' Whenever he passes on advice he is usually right, although I cannot understand why he insists on living the life he warns me about. I don't think he understands either, maybe his wife does.

My girlfriend and I equally enjoy observing his torture. We derive most pleasure from the knowledge that we can leave and he must stay. It gives us a sense of freedom that we perhaps otherwise would not appreciate. We always smile as we wave goodbye and my girlfriend insists on shutting his gate. Perhaps making sure that he and his children and therapist wife can't escape.

My friend has started to scratch his back and head a lot. It is not a nervous reaction but more of a compulsive disorder. When he does it his wife shouts at him to stop. She explains that he is repressing his anger and that he should go to the 'angry corner' at the back of the garden if he has anything he needs to let out. She tells him that his behaviour is dysfunctional and that the children need a role model, an adult, not another child. He apologises and asks if he can go outside to shout in the angry corner.

Once I heard him shouting in the angry corner. His head was directed at the ground and he was quite clearly taking his frustration out on a worm that had temporarily surfaced. He shouted lots of things and there was more on his mind than he ever let on to me. It serves no purpose to reiterate his angst but you got the impression that maybe he was still a child, as only a child could

have the imagination to juxtapose the words he was using.

When he left the angry corner I knelt down and took a good look at the worm. I wondered if it had ears and if so what must it be thinking now. It's probably riddled with guilt after hearing that confessional and grateful for the simplicity of its existence. It must be a pretty blissful life to squirm in and out of mud all day. Just twisting and turning in darkness. As I tried to figure out the lifestyle of this strange parasite one of his kids came over. He told me that his mum had sent him, that I wasn't allowed to just stand in the angry corner and do nothing. If I wanted to do that I should go to church and pray, even though there was no such thing as God. He told me that his mum thought religion was like cheap therapy and that it infringed upon her business. He then told me they had a thoughtful corner in the shed and if I didn't feel like shouting I could go and sit in there. I asked him if he ever went in there but he said he didn't because it was boring. He then started to shout.

'What are you doing?'

'Getting angry.'

'Why?'

'Cause it's the angry corner.'

He was soon joined by two brothers and a sister. I think it was their sister although I can't recollect seeing her before. They all started to shout and I began to think, perhaps this is why the worm comes up for air. He hears the shouting and has to inspect. It's just like fish when it rains and they come to the surface thinking there is food. I pointed out the worm to the kids although I had to shout 'there's a worm' as they couldn't hear me above the noise.

One of the kids took a half broken cricket stump that lay against the fence and pierced it through the worm, splitting it in two.

'What are you doing?' I asked, 'No don't tell me, it's the angry corner, so you're killing the worm.'

'No I'm not. Worms can rejoin together.'

'Have you ever seen them do it?'

'No.'

'How do you know then?'

He paused and then with all the confidence of a ministerial press agent, declared 'Mum told me.'

I went back in to the house and my friend was still scratching. He was making ten cups of tea in cups with missing handles. It's a pity cups couldn't re-animate themselves; he obviously couldn't afford any new ones. I asked my friend why he never boiled the kettle when he made tea and he told me the kettle was broke. He then began to explain that it was inconsequential. By the time he had made all the drinks and found the relevant child or adult they were cold anyway. He began to scratch some more, using the tip of his nail so as to gradually break through the surface of the skin.

He never used to scratch so purposefully, as if he was actually trying to shed skin like a snake. But despite his efforts it won't come off, reminding him once more of his ineffectuality. I think he knows this though and so there is no point me telling him. Instead I try to ignore him when he does it by fixating on bits of torn wallpaper.

Once my girlfriend went up and scratched his back for him. He looked guiltily at me and said, 'We're not having an affair.' I told him I knew they weren't and he looked relieved, like I was the first person in the world who had digested what he had said.

I like his kids the most. They are eternally dirty and I have come to suspect they wash in mud. They are always dismantling something or blatantly destroying it. This applies to anything within their range. A neighbour's cat, a fence, a sycamore tree, an old washing machine, toys, dining room table, hi-fi, cupboards, anything and everything they can get their hands on. Sometimes they break things they have already broken. At christmas instead of unwrapping presents they jump on them or try to set them on fire, or drop them out of windows to unwrap the packaging. 'Leave them, its best the anger is out than in,' informs his wife, as my friend starts scratching.

‘If your clothes are ruined don’t bother telling your mum it was me. A road is for driving over and that includes anything in the way.’

The kids tug at their crumpled clothing, place the ball under their arms and return to their homes sad, now the ultimate referee has blown a close to their game. They shuffle off to their respective sides of the street and a unanimous decision is made as to who won the game, then it is challenges and banter in preparation for the inevitable rematch.

When the kids are gone and there is no-one to shout at, the white van man looks sad. He has been locked up for too long in his van and he is desperate for human company but in his eagerness to communicate he only frightens people away. It is a lonely existence and the only warmth he has comes from the parcels he faithfully delivers. I watch him lock up and he watches me, watching him. He tells me in no uncertain terms what he will do to the kids if the ball hits his van. He tells me what he will do to the kids if they trample his flowers. There is no point telling him there are no flowers in his garden and that the kids have now gone. He does not need to listen. He needs to talk. When he gets home, he will need to eat. Then he will need to sleep. He may need to fuck at some point, but it is not as regular as the other essentials that dominate his world.

The next day the kids play football. It is 3-2. It is Forest versus Barnsley and strangely is more interesting than if you were actually watching Forest versus Barnsley. One girl’s persistence pays off and is allowed to go in goal; a diet based on cola cubes and Mr. Kipling cakes has sculptured a frame large enough to fill the entire net. The white van zooms around the corner. You can hear his exhaust blowing up the street. The kids are in a mass scramble fighting for possession of the ball. They stop playing just as his van screeches around the corner. An instinct that keeps them there right to the last second, sucking every moment of freedom they can and then they scarper back to their homes. Praising each other on

She told me if I was having problems grasping the seriousness of this then I should imagine the current railway system and multiply it by ten. Then she pointed a finger at my mate. ‘Him,’ she said, and shook her head, as he began to scratch his arm.

My friend thought he had a pretty easy ride when she was reading books on quantum physics as he was able to deny that he was actually ever there each time she accused him of doing something wrong. But his wife was quick to point out that as this life would then be subjected to infinite variables he was accountable for every single thing that had gone wrong with the world.

It was quite quiet in his house when his wife went through her nihilist stage. Every time he asked her something she refused to answer because there was no point. Similarly there was no point in pointing out all his bad points as what’s the point if we are going to die anyway? His scratching ceased for a while. Not because he was no longer a nervous wreck but because he had read one of her books and realised there was no point to scratching either.

My girlfriend’s favourite stage was the Feng Shui. When his wife had determined which window was the most calming the children were only allowed to smash up toys at the opposite end of the house. This meant, for a couple of weeks at least, you were guaranteed a temporary reprieve. No child was likely to come and crush a power ranger over your skull.

My girlfriend and I would always want to leave the house at roughly the same time. We had a similar threshold and the wisdom to know when enough was enough. It may have been too many cold teas or having too many items from your bag broken by the kids. Or perhaps it was the two hour conversation with his wife about self-realization, who knows? But something would click and we would have to go. We would be around next month on the last Sunday.

As we reversed out the drive all the kids would shout goodbye, some would throw Lego at the bonnet, whilst another would opt

for a water gun filled with paint. My mate ran up to the window as he would every time we left after a visit.

‘You are gonna come back aren’t you?’

‘Of course.’

‘Promise.’

‘I promise.’

Then he would take my girlfriend’s hand and ask her if she had any desires to become a therapist and she would smile and say ‘fuck off’. He would then look at me, telling me I had a good one there, and I didn’t want to gloat so I just smiled back.

I don’t know why but when we got back we used to have the best sex ever and then we would sit silent for hours, breathing into each other and occasionally planting kisses on what ever the nearest part of the body to our mouths was; communication, without the hindrance of words.

The White Van Man

The kids put their jackets or jumpers at the end of the street to make imaginary goal posts. They laugh and shout, occasionally tripping over and cutting a knee. Sometimes they push, sometimes they pull, and occasionally a bit of both. It is all the boys from odd numbered houses against all the boys from even numbered houses, but in their heads it is Forest versus Derby. Sometimes sisters are allowed to join in but they soon stop playing because nobody will pass the ball. It is the kind of attitude they have come to expect from all boys, whether from the odd or even numbered houses on the street.

An occasional ball lands in a garden and they momentarily pause. A system is developed where they take it in turns to retrieve the ball. They are in and out, with heads bowed low to avoid the occupant who will castigate them for crushing some flowers or for not shutting the gate. Sometimes it lands in number forty-three where instead of retrieving a pig’s bladder you would think some kind of political negotiation was going on. I suppose learning tolerance is not such a bad quality to install into the young. To avoid conflict I have seen them use fishing nets, skipping ropes, and any other instrument that may release the ball from the clutches of overgrown lawns. But generally speaking the neighbours are accommodating, because one of their kids is involved in the game.

Then the white van man screeches into the street, runs over the kids’ clothes, tramples the goal posts, and parks his mechanical horse in the middle of the pitch. It is something that never happens to those players who grace the City Ground, and puts an end to their imaginary match as it does at the same time every night.

The van driver jumps down from his white horse and fills the air with immediate rhetoric, a football supporter in his own right.

‘Go and play somewhere else.’

‘Don’t moan if you get run over. You shouldn’t be playing on the streets.’

play more and more like Forest each day. As he veers into the street he drives closer to the children than he has done all year. He seems intent on popping the ball but the worrying thing is the ball is in the arms of one of the boys. It is a lucky escape and I think the only reason he didn't kill the child is he would no longer have someone to shout at.

He exits his van and with it the usual rhetoric exits his mouth. The kids continue walking as if nothing has happened. He slams shut his gate and he slams shut his front door and he will no doubt slam down his food and maybe on to his wife as well.

That night I clean his van and pay particular attention to the grill. It is full of dead insects he has unknowingly killed. Perhaps I should have left them as it would probably cheer him up to know he has had such a profound effect on the world. I plant a few flowers around his garden path and have been careful not to select any with thorns so as not to wind him up. I even find time to give his lawn a little trim which takes me a good four hours as I have to do it all by hand so as not to wake him. By the time I have finished it is only 4.45am so I varnish his door and porch to stop it rotting in the rain. I even place a little bench I no longer use in the middle of his grass, just so he has the option of sitting when he shouts at the kids.

The next night, he comes home earlier than usual. He is not driving as fast and the kids do not run when he pulls up. They know something has changed to their schedule and they wait to find out what it is; what new rule they must adhere to if they are to share the same space. Instead of jumping out and slamming his door he sort of clambers out. He looks at the kids and instead of shouting at them just stares. The children stare back and one with his front teeth missing smiles. The white van man goes mad. Perhaps he has false teeth and thinks the young lad is taking the piss.

He screams that he doesn't like flowers because they give him hay-fever and that the smell of wood varnish gives him a headache.

a certain goal or move during the game and then discussing what 'Marlon Harewood would have done.' Although one jokes, he would probably have run into the van.

They have accepted the rules as only children can learn to do. Kids can deal with anything once it becomes a part of everyday. It is a silly world with silly rules that cramps their enjoyment and freedom, but one which they dutifully respect. It is good that it doesn't wear them down now as it will in later years. I however am worn down and instead of a near miss I can only see the potential of death.

'You could have killed one of them,' I point out.

'Good,' he shouts back before adding, 'there's nothing stopping them playing up the park.'

I hear one kid mumble to another that they are not allowed to play up the park because there are dirty syringes. I don't think any of them know this for certain, rather it is something they have heard their parents say; a convenient morality given that to play up there would entail a lift.

The white van man senses this. He points to his dirty van and explains, 'This is proper dirt' and how it can only be obtained from a hard days graft. Emblazoned in the dirt is the notorious graffiti of 'also available in white' written on both sides. It seems to be on all the vans in this area and I wonder if it is a Nottingham thing, the kind of obvious humour that appears to obvious minded men. He points to a mark on his van and declares it's a ball mark. I tell him it's a branch mark. He asks me what the fuck do I know, so I think what the hell, and tell him.

'Firstly the mark you are pointing to is not rotund, which is the shape you would expect a spherical object to make. Secondly, your van is scratched and has red marks, which indicates to me you have been snared by a hawthorn tree which is thorny, covered in berries and most commonly found in hedgerows. Can you remember passing a group of twelve metre high trees with bright brown flaky bark?'

He bellows, ‘You *Guardian*-reading...clunt,’ and then whilst staring at my clean red car adds, ‘What the fuck do you know about anything?’

I do not have time to answer such an open-ended question and instead shrug my shoulders as he tells me what he knows; which is, kids should be in bed. They should be seen and not heard and that parents don’t beat their kids enough. He then tells me about how he has to drive to Sheffield every day, which obviously annoys him to the extent that he cannot even resist telling me his preferred route. He then pats his van, shakes his head and shouts something about not needing any shit from liberals and unruly brats after a hard days work.

I feel sorry for the kids on our street; everybody wants to blame them for something. I sometimes think the neighbours were born thirty-six and have forgotten what it was like to be young. Is it not enough that their fantasies and role playing involve becoming Nottingham Forest?

I am girded into action as someone has to defend these kids and so I creep out of bed at some post-midnight hour. I walk up to his van and on close inspection am delighted to find I was right about the marks being from the Hawthorn tree and I can tell by the jagged shape made by the leaves. Instead I write ‘National Front Rules’, safe in the knowledge that he will probably receive a good kicking when up in Sheffield when he tries to run over Sheffield kids playing football in the streets. He will be incriminated as a racist rather than the lesser label of careless driver, which always allows him to get off.

No sooner have I vented my spleen do I find myself rubbing it off. This is not my world and it’s not how I operate. If he receives a black eye it will only end up as a black eye for someone else. This system operates too frequently in life and is why nothing ever gets sorted out. Instead I go back to my house and return with a bucket full of soapy suds and I clean his van. When it has been cleaned I give it a polish with some turtle wax I never had the energy to use

on my own car. I am tempted to write also available in grey but figure this would ruin the gesture. It takes me three hours but feels longer as I am aware he is snoring in bed and probably farting on his wife’s leg as he sleeps.

When he awakes he looks confused. He walks around his van inspecting it. He can see his face reflected off the bonnet and it looks like Dorian Gray. He twists his head around, hoping to find the culprit peeking out from behind a bush. When he can find nobody he drives off.

That evening as the kids play football, it is Forest versus Coventry and it’s the F.A. Cup third round. The score is 4-4 and it’s one of the best games I have seen all week. The girl who used to play in goal is having a blinder up front. Suddenly the distant noise of a spluttering van can be heard gaining momentum. The girl is through with a shooting opportunity but at the last minute picks up the ball; not prepared to get run over for a win, she valiantly decides upon a draw.

As the kids walk away, the white van man tries to reverse over one but they are wise to his antics and dodge his attempted tackle. He shouts at them, telling them they should be in bed. He warns that a ball had better not hit his fence and then threatens to buy a dog that will rip their ball to shreds. I smile and wave at him and he tells me its about time I got a job, as he slams shut his rusty gates to keep the rest of the world out.

That night his van only takes an hour to clean and I don’t even have to polish it because it still has its sheen. As I have saved so much time I decide to apply some *Hammerite* to his gate and give it a little oil as well. I sleep in the next morning and so miss out on his reaction but I don’t mind. Now the gate shimmers in the sunlight, it looks quite beautiful.

His van makes a different noise to usual when we hear it coming up the road. Perhaps an annual MOT has given it the extra bit of bite it had been missing before. The kids are in the middle of a boring 0-0 draw and to my great disappointment are starting to

He screams that he likes his lawn overgrown because then he can't see children out his window. He complains that his gate was not sanded down before it was painted and the bench is so damp if he sits on it he'll get piles. He explains that his van is his job and people shouldn't clean it because if they caused any damage he would get the blame. Were they trying to get him the sack when all he wants to do is earn some money?

He then muttered something about painting your own houses and leaving him in peace and about how he was going to buy a dog that would rip apart their ball and tear it to shreds. Then he slammed his door shut so hard it rattled the window pane, but thankfully it did not break. The kids turned around and went back home and I opened up the pages of *The Guardian*; realising, that perhaps not everybody in the world wants your help.

James K Walker

James K Walker has written freelance and fiction for numerous publications. In 2003 he won the Jo Cowell Award. His first novel *This is All I Know* is due to be published by Pomona and he is currently researching a book about Brian Clough. For information on this and other work please visit www.jameskwalker.com

When James is not writing he likes to play football with the kids on his street, but refuses to go in goal.