

"BEFORE"

I was not even born then but I like to pretend that I was.

Because my face is older looking than it actually is people tend to believe me and ask, "what was it like back then, before all of this?"

"Oh," I usually reply, "it was not so very different from now: trees, and hills, and people falling in and out of love etc.

Of course, there were dinosaurs back then and mythical creatures with wings and sinister powers. We don't have so many of those these days, but aside from that, everything was pretty much the way it is now."

"Were people happier back then?" they ask. And I always, always say, "yes, absolutely! People were so much happier back then," because everyone wants to believe that sadness is a new invention and people who are alive right now have it way worse than anyone who has ever been alive in the past.

Sometimes people do not believe me when I tell them I can remember how things were before.

They wonder if I might be making some of this up. "Are you sure about the past?" they ask, "because we heard that people back then, thought they weren't as happy as the people who'd come before them."

I am thinking of growing a beard in order to appear older and more authoritative to these people.

"CHOCOLATE"

Cathy is not a bad daughter. Cathy has always been exceptionally kind to her mum.

She phones almost every day. She never forgets birthdays or anniversaries and has been spending the Lockdown knitting a beautiful turquoise sweater; this being her mum's very favourite shade of blue.

Cathy is missing her mum. It has been eight weeks since they last saw each other.

Every day Cathy looks at the huge box of delicious chocolates she'd bought her mum for Mother's Day. It is still sitting, unopened, on the kitchen bench.

Cathy has not had a chance to deliver it to her mum. The chocolates remind Cathy of how much she loves her mum and also how much she loves chocolate.

This evening Cathy is feeling wobbly. She opens the chocolates and eats twenty six in one go. Now Cathy feels terrible. Does she love chocolate more than her mum?

She phones her mum to confess. "I'm sorry," she says, "I tried to keep your Mother's Day chocolates until I saw you again but they were just too tempting."

Cathy's mum isn't cross. She'd bought an Easter Egg for Cathy two months ago and, realizing, she wouldn't see her daughter again for some time, had eaten it all, in one sitting, on Easter Monday. Cathy's mum does not mention this on the phone.

She does not feel one bit guilty about it.

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"GROCERIES"

This evening William and Eleanor are having sweet and sour fish fingers for their tea. Eleanor is picking round the edges of her plate, not really eating anything but the rice. William is shovelling his food down. He is declaring it delicious. "Who'd have thought fish fingers would go so well with sweet and sour sauce?" he says. He is not very convincing. Eleanor can see he is doing his best not to gag.

It was the same last night when she made sausage curry with mandarin oranges floating through the sauce like tiny, drunken goldfish. Eleanor is not an experimental cook, but she has to make the most of the ingredients she's got.

Every day she sends William to the shop with a list of the things she'd pick up if she were able to go herself. Every day William insists that he doesn't need a list. His memory is fine. He will remember everything he needs to buy.

In the shop, William gets distracted by the brightly coloured packets and the people bustling about. He grabs the first items he sees and returns to find Eleanor disappointed with what he's bought but determined not to be critical. Eleanor is fed up stemming her hunger with covert slices of toast, eaten whilst William is in the loo. William is fed up trying to pretend he enjoys his wife's new avant garde style of cooking.

Independently, they each text their daughter, Susan to complain about the situation.

Susan is well-used to negotiating between the two of them. She tells her mum not to worry. Tesco's can deliver now. Susan will even tell her dad it was all her idea.



"PORTABLE SUNSET"

My friend, who lives by the seaside, realized that I might be missing the ocean.

It was not just the sound of the waves tickling the shingle I was thinking of fondly, or the feel of the water sliding over my legs, or even the crunch of sand and tiny seashells shifting about beneath my feet. More than anything, I was missing the sunset.

Of course, the sun still sets where I live, but it is almost impossible to see it properly past the roofs and chimneys and tall electricity pylons. I have been missing an uninterrupted horizon and the sight of the sun, dipping into the water like a split egg yolk, and the sky shot through with fiery colours.

My friend understood this. She took her easel down to the edge of the shore one evening and painted me a portable sunset. She used all the loudest colours in her palette and, afterwards, slipped it into an envelope and posted it to me, in my house, miles from the sea.

Now, I can carry the sunset with me. I can watch it every evening. When I stand in front of those bold oranges and flaming reds, I imagine I can feel a kind of warmth rising off the canvas.

I wonder if this is the memory of sunsets or perhaps, the thought of my friend, so many miles away, remember me.

"THE BAD THING"

Yesterday a bad thing happened. The bad thing was too big and solid to ignore.

The girl was no stranger to bad things, though in the past they'd been different: smaller, easier to let go of, the sort of things which could slip down the side of a sofa and disappear.

This bad thing was different. It was a kind of oblong, heavy and rough to the touch, like the gritty texture of a crab's shell. The girl did not want to look at the bad thing. She did not even want to think about it. She placed it in her handbag, making room for it amongst the paperback novels, sweetie wrappers and lipsticks, (four, in a variety of bright red shades).

All day, her handbag felt heavier than usual. It dug into her shoulder leaving a raw red groove, three inches in diameter. The bad thing bumped up against her every time she moved.

That night, when the girl emptied her handbag before bed, she saw that the bad thing was still there but there were many other things attached to it now: tissues, hairbrushes, kind words from old friends, a cup of coffee she had not asked for but desperately needed, the melody from a radio song, two late night text messages and the lend of an umbrella.

The bad thing was no smaller than before, but the girl could bear the sight of it now. It no longer looked quite as sharp around the edges.

"ZOO"

Meanwhile, in the zoo, the animals are preparing to come out of Lockdown.

In a few weeks' time the visitors will begin to return.

Every day there will be a constant stream of snotty-nosed children and adults with cameras peering at them from behind the glass, expecting them to perform.

The animals have enjoyed these last few months of privacy.

The tigers have not felt the need to be as fierce as usual. They have been learning how to ballroom dance and practicing yoga in the grass.

The sloths have also taken a break from routine. They've been jogging around their enclosure and turning crazy cartwheels just for the sheer joy of moving quickly for a change.

And the giraffes?

Well, the giraffes have been happiest of all. After so many years of stretching and straining to appear skyscraper tall for the visitors, they've been able to relax and let their necks slouch back down to a more comfortable position. They've even been eating the leaves off the lowest branches and have found this a very civilized arrangement.

When the zoo re-opens things will have to return to normal.

The tigers will be fierce. The sloths will be slow. The giraffes, exceptionally tall.

Visitors expect the animals to be a certain way. The animals understand this.

But it has been nice, these last few months, to get a break from being themselves.



"EASYJET WORLDS"

A man in the line for Edinburgh has three inflatable worlds in a plastic bag. He is stopped at the departure gate by an Easyjet representative.

“What have you got in the bag?” she asks. It is seven am, too early for lipstick, but she is wearing a thick gash of it; fire blood red.

“Three worlds,” he replies, and removes them one at a time, clamping them between his feet, for the world is shaped like a soccer ball and inclined to roll if permitted to do so.

“One item of hand luggage only,” she states mechanically, already eyeing up the next offender.

The man proceeds to demonstrate how, with great determinations and a little pressure, the world, (and all those back up worlds to come), can be contained within an overhead luggage locker.

"LONG DISTANCE HUG"

Emma asks her Gran what she is missing most in the whole entire world.

Emma is most missing her best friend Lily, and the waterpark in Lisburn and the delicious pink ice cream from the shop that isn't open at the minute.

Gran says she is definitely most missing Emma's hugs. Talking together on the phone is nice but you can't fit your arms down a telephone wire to hug someone you love, and she could really use a big hug right now. Gran says Emma's hugs are the very best. They are just the right length and tightness and they are warm and squidgy, like being wrapped up in a winter blanket.

Emma feels sad that she can't give her gran a hug with her actual arms, so she decides to send her a long distance hug instead.

She borrows her big sister's knitting needles and uses pale, yellow wool to knit a perfectly Gran-shaped hug. It is just the right length and tightness. It is warm and squidgy. It will wrap all the way round Gran where Emma's arms usually go.

When the hug is finished, she will place it in a cardboard box and post it to the faraway place where Gran lives. Emma will not tell Gran that the hug is coming. She wants it to be a big surprise.

"WARDROBE PORTAL"

My children have started pestering me about the wardrobe. I was expecting this.

They've been reading the Narnia books and now they know my wardrobe also has a portal to another world, they are keen to experience it for themselves.

I have to explain to them over and over again that my wardrobe only works for grown-ups and the portal doesn't lead to Narnia, only a series of places children would find extremely dull such as Sainsburys and the Dentist and Sunday morning church.

"You can't come with me," I explain, "and even if you could, you wouldn't enjoy yourselves."

I tell them they'll have a much better time downstairs playing video games and trashing the living room and tormenting their father.

I am very clear on the fact that they must not disturb Mummy when she disappears into her magic wardrobe with her wine and her magazines and her torch, (which will help her to see the way home). They must not knock on the closed wardrobe door or make demands from the other side because Mummy will not hear them.

For one solid hour she will be far away, in another world.



"AGNES"

Your father's mother was Agnes. She came from a rural townland, all vowels and phlegm to say. Her home house was a series of small boxes stacked one upon the other; a neat and God-fearing establishment with nothing in the way of show. So many weans went through that wee house they ran out of good, Protestant names to give them, so the last was called after the first who'd died young of something you could cure with antibiotics now.

Your granny was a weaver of linen. No different from all the other Agnes's tending loom in Lisburn, Belfast and Portadown. She took her lunch in her hand each morning and walked a dark mile there and back. She did not see herself party to something significant. Yet, each morning she took the raw yarn in her hands and, though it was as old lady's hair or horsetails caught up in knots, saw only what it could be: a handkerchief, a Sunday shirt, a finely embroidered tablecloth paling over a big house table. She lifted her shuttle and wove the future into each tangled strand and did not stop 'til the mills began falling down around her.

Picture your granny, every day from eight 'til six. First in Ross's Factory, aged thirteen all the way up to the age you are now. Then, later in the Phoenix which was farther to walk but more money. Picture her lame in the foot from a dropped shuttle. Picture her wearing her retirement watch to church, hoiking her sleeve up to show the gold of it off. Picture ten thousand woman like her: spinning, weaving and stitching, leaning against mill walls, smoking. Tell yourself there was nothing remarkable about your granny and this is why you never asked.

"AMERICANO"

It is ten weeks since I last drank a cup of coffee which I did not make myself.

Ten, extremely long weeks! I am surviving on Nescafe instant and the hope of consuming a decent Americano at some stage in the not too distant future. Today's the day. The coffee shop on the corner is finally open again and I am more than happy to stand in line patiently waiting almost half an hour for my first real dose of caffeine in months.

When I order my Americano at the hatch, I lose the run of myself. "Put a couple of extra shots in there," I say. The barista obliges. My Americano is so thick and intense you could stand a spoon up in it. I down it in a dozen scalding mouthfuls. It is the best thing I've tasted since Christmas.

The caffeine kicks in ten minutes later. My poor body has grown accustomed to weak Nescafe. The Americano feels like rocket fuel soaring through my veins. I write fifty two emails on the back of it and mow the lawn both front and back and Hoover the entire house and jog all the way to Dundonald and still the energy keeps coming. It is now 3 am and I am wide awake with no notion of sleeping. In four hours the coffee shop will open again and I can go back for another dose.

"ICE CREAM MAN"

There's a new ice cream man in our neighbourhood.

He comes around every evening just after dinner, lights twinkling, music tinkling out of the enormous speakers mounted on top of his van.

He sells all the regular products: cones, choc ices, ice pops, lollies, sliders. His ice cream is thick and creamy and comes out of the machine in a perfect swirl.

He is very generous with his portions. The new ice cream man isn't like the old one. He has adapted to meet the needs of the moment.

At home, in his own kitchen, each morning, he mixes up a huge batch of his special ice cream sauce.

Into the pan goes sunshine and wide blue oceans, beaches, barbecues, picnics, waterslides, bikinis, suntan lotion, poolside cocktails and five thousand renditions of the best holiday tunes, (Agadoo, Club Tropicana, The Macarena).

The ice cream man distils his special sauce into squeeze bottles and keeps them beneath the counter. Those in the know always ask for extra sauce on their ice cream. They watch it run, dripping down the side of their cones, knowing that the very first lick will give them a taste of everything they're most missing.

The new ice cream man's a genius. He's worked out how to fit an entire summer holiday into a bottle and he's sharing it with everyone.



"GLADYS"

Your mother's mother was Gladys, the first syllable of which is, Glad. This sat sweetly with her face which was always smiling, always parting its lips in praise. She was born at the smarter end of the Cliftonville Road, in a red house, with a pitched roof and windows. When the Blitz descended upon Belfast, the windows came in and everyone was under the table praying. It seemed, for one long night, like the world was ending right outside her front door. She told you this for a school project, and how she was sent to Bangor for safekeeping. You have a picture of her paddling in the sea. In this picture she looks exactly like Anne Frank. Serene. Striking. Miles away, behind the eyes.

Your nana was not the sort of girl who worked in mills. She did not work at all, but married well, and stayed home playing piano and knitting. Sweaters were her thing. She knit you itchy ones for school and Girls' Brigade, a softer yellow number for your fifth birthday. It had a horse on the front with loose strands of brown wool, knotted into a mane. It stretched with you, all the way up to Primary Six. You also recall hats, mittens and blankets for other people's grandchildren. A cardigan, with mother-of-pearl buttons, winking through the Mohair like tiny, open eyes. Sometimes people still say to you, "your nana was a great wee knitter."

Picture your nana in an armchair by the fire. Slippers on. Teapot stewing on the hearth. Note the click, fidget, click of needle meeting needle, the way her fingers do the looking for her, the chubby eights of double knit in pink, lemon, and palest blue, rolling across the carpet towards the door, like tendrils stretching for the light. Picture her singing in time with the stitches: hymns and choruses, romantic songs by Jim Reeves.

Your nana knit until her fingers turned to thumbs and it hurt to pull the yarn tightly. In the end she forgot what her fingers were for, though they still flew backwards and forwards across the bed sheets, as if she held phantom needles in her hands, as if the stale, hospital air could be knit into one last sweater.

"THE SEA"

It had been such a long time since I last saw the sea – not just weeks, several long months.

I was not worried. I knew the sea was still there. It was not the sort of thing which ran out or changed with time and distance.

However, yesterday, when I finally got to pay the sea a visit and stood, ankle deep in its swirling grey waves, I realized it was not as I'd remembered it. It was bigger now and wider than ever. I struggled to picture any of the places which lay on the other side of the water. They did not seem real to me anymore. They were like imaginary cities and kingdoms lifted from the pages of a story book.

I peered out to sea and tried my best to locate the spot where the horizon ran out and could not find it and began to wonder if the sea was endless now; if we were cut off from everything else.

I suspected it wasn't. The sea was just the same as it had always been. I was the one who'd changed. I saw everything a little differently now.

"BOOKSHOP"

This morning I woke up so early it was almost yesterday. I could not get back to sleep for the excitement.

Today was going to be better than all the Christmases and Birthdays rolled into one.

Today the bookshop was opening again. I was first in line to wait. I did not care that this meant standing in the cold for two hours.

When the sign changed from closed to open, I went skipping through the front door with an enormous smile on my face.

I'd made a list. I wanted to shop efficiently. I was aware of all the other people waiting patiently for their chance to buy a book. I went around the shop, lifting books off shelves and piling them on the counter. I'd had three months to think about my purchases. I knew exactly what I was after.

The bookshop owner's eyes grew bigger and bigger as my book pile crept towards the ceiling.

Don't worry," I said, "I've got something to carry them home in," I pointed towards the wheelbarrow I'd brought with me.

Gosh," said the bookshop owner, "you must be absolutely desperate for something to read. Don't you have any books in your own house?"

I thought about lying, but I knew the bookshop owner would understand. He wouldn't judge me.

"Oh no," I said, "I have two thousand books at home. I just don't fancy reading any of those books at the minute."



"DISHES"

Friday afternoon, Limerick to Limerick Junction. The train is full of students returning home for the weekend. They're sitting three to a seat, cross-legged on the floor and sprawled across the aisles. They've shoved their enormous duffel bags into every available space so the train is like a children's padded play area. Every sharp surface is cushioned with bagged laundry, en route to the washing machines of their waiting mothers. You haul your own pull-on suitcase down the aisle, buffering your way slowly past sports bags and soft-sided hold-alls until your shin makes contact with something sharp and unyielding. You hit this case a fair crack. It rocks on its tiny button wheels and almost topples, making a noise like crockery shuffled.

"Sorry," says the bag's owner, a young fella in a Gaelic top, "I've all my plates and cups in there."

"Why?" you ask. "Are you moving house?"

You rub your shin, through your jeans. You can feel the bruise already beginning to bloom. You want him to notice you're in pain and feel repentant. He doesn't.

"Oh no," he says, "I'm not moving. I'm only up home for the weekend. I'm taking my dirty dishes home to me mammy. She washes them for me so I've nice clean ones to bring back to college on Sunday."

I can see the young fella stood next to him is all ears. I hope he's not getting any ideas. He's only presenting his mother with pants and socks today, but next weekend he might chance a casserole dish or a saucepan crusted with the charcoaled remains of Monday night's Supernoodles. I despair. I wonder how they survive the week.

"CAPPUCCINO"

I only came in for a cappuccino. I didn't even really want a cappuccino. I wanted something stronger or perhaps something which would make me feel stronger, something like scaffolding, for I was in danger of falling apart. I came in for a cappuccino, but the cappuccino was really just an excuse to leave the ward for ten minutes. I needed an excuse.

I'd been there all night, sitting by his bedside, not daring to leave and all the time wishing to be sat anywhere but here, holding his hand as I tried to imagine him grown up, years from now, in a place that wasn't here. I didn't even really want a cappuccino. I wanted something that would make me feel older and braver, more like a proper mother, less inclined to keep glancing at the door, waiting for a real adult to appear and take charge.

This was a lot to be asking of a takeaway coffee but the woman at the till seemed to understand how much was riding on this cappuccino. "Are you alright, Love?" she asked, as she slid my cup across the counter. Our hands touched briefly. She smiled.

Though I could not have explained why, I knew that this, and the cappuccino, would be enough to keep me going for a little while longer.

"CHERRY SCONES"

Like many other young people, Simon has been learning a new skill during Lockdown.

Simon has become a baker. Armed with nothing but a Delia Smith cookery book and lots of enthusiasm, he has taught himself how to bake cakes, buns and various kinds of biscuits.

Simon is rather pleased with his efforts though, as it's just him and his dog Samson, he has not had any feedback on his baking.

Now, the Lockdown is easing, Simon thinks it would be nice to share his cakes with the elderly people who live in his neighbourhood. He goes door to door with a cake tin, offering them his freshly baked cherry scones.

The old people are not as grateful as Simon had expected. One, peers into the tin and asks, "what's it meant to be?"

Another says she doesn't like cherry scones, and could he do her some cheese scones instead?

The next morning Simon is dismayed to find one of his neighbours has put her cherry scone out on the bird table.

He notes, with sadness, that the birds are yet to touch it, but he refuses to be discouraged.

"It is not my baking that's at fault," Simon tells himself. "It is the people in this neighbourhood. Their tastes aren't as sophisticated as they could be."



"CHESS"

Grandpa and I used to meet every Sunday afternoon for an ice cream and a game of chess.

He taught me how to play when I was only three and we've had a game together almost every week since. I am almost a grown up now.

I've read dozens of books about chess and studied videos of the grandmasters but Grandpa still beats me most Sundays. He's nice about it, though I suspect he'll always be a better player than me.

Grandpa's been shielding since the start of spring. He hasn't been able to leave the nursing home and I can't get inside for a visit. It makes our Sunday chess game a little more difficult, but I'm determined to keep the tradition going.

Every Sunday, Mum drives me across town with the chessboard balanced carefully on my knee. At the nursing home, Grandpa comes up close to the window and I hold the board up so he can see. He takes a while to think, then shouts which move he'd like to make through the open window. He can't stand for very long so we only get to make one move per week.

This works well for me. I take the board home. I have ages to think about my next move. I am playing a slow and tactical game. It has been fourteen weeks since we began it. If I take my time and I concentrate, I might finally be able to win a game of chess with my grandpa.

"SWINGS"

Other people are looking forward to their first haircut, their first meal in a restaurant or their first time hugging a friend in almost four months.

I am also looking forward to these things. But what I can't wait for more than anything else, is the moment they reopen the parks and I can swing again.

Everyday I walk past the play park and check that the chains are still bound firmly around the gates. I look wistfully at the slides, the climbing frame and roundabout and remember the good times I've had playing on them.

Then, I spend a few precious minutes, staring at the swings, trying to imagine what it will feel like, someday, not too long from now, to sit on the tiny, plastic seat and scissor my legs backwards and forwards until I am soaring through the air, hair streaming out behind me, like a bird or a plane or a perfectly fired arrow, more free and ungrounded than I have been in months.

"FROGSPAWN"

I have been following the girl on the Internet who has filled her paddling pool with frogspawn. I am jealous.

My parents won't let me have a pet in the house; not even a goldfish. They say pets are messy and a lot of work and they don't need the extra hassle.

I've always wanted a pet; a dog ideally, or even a cat. I couldn't hide a dog or cat from my parents but the girl on the Internet has got me thinking.

Frogspawn doesn't seem like a lot of work and I could easily hide a basin full of tadpoles under my bed.

I go down to the stream at the bottom of our field and sneak a jam jar full of frogspawn up to my bedroom.

Each night, while my parents are sleeping, I pull the basin out from under my bed and use a torch to monitor the progress of my tadpoles. I watch them grow back dot bodies, long, slimy tails and thin spindly legs. When their tails begin to disappear, I will take them outside and release them back into the wild.

Unfortunately, I got too attached to my tadpoles. I gave them names and talked to them and left them under my bed for far too long.

This morning I woke to find the carpet thick with dozens of tiny hopping frogs. I won't be able to catch them all before my parents wake. They'll be raging.

I'll never be allowed a real pet now.



"BUNS"

The girls are out for the day. They're wearing lipstick on a weekday. They're treating themselves to a wee top or a new pair of highish heels. They are enjoying a glass of wine with lunch and they're not even feeling guilty about it. Why shouldn't they spoil themselves? It's not as if they don't work hard. They call themselves 'the girls' because it makes them feel like they're still in their twenties. Some of their kids aren't even in their twenties anymore. They have pet names for each other – Vix and JoJo and Mel D - which they only use when texting. They'd feel daft saying these names out loud, like adults wearing teenagers' clothes. Still, they like the idea of being part of a gang.

Vix, (who is really Victoria), buys them all cream buns for the train home. They're half way to Coleraine when she remembers them. "Girls," she says, "I've been naughty. I've bought us all a wee treat." The girls protest. JoJo's doing Weight Watchers. Mel's just signed up for Slimming World. Then again, it's not every day they're out together and sure, can't they make up for it tomorrow; eat nothing but grapefruit all day?

"Uch, go on then," they say, "one wee bun won't kill us." But the buns are nowhere to be found. They're not on the parcel shelf with the shopping. They're not in Vix's handbag or slipped beneath the seat. "I think, I've left them at the station, back in Derry," she says, "somebody else's probably eaten them by now."

"Ah well," they say, "it's for the best. Think of the calories we're saving." They are no longer using their 'girl' voices. They are quieter now, more sensible with each other. They are already home in their heads: putting a load of washing on and thinking about what to make for dinner. Counting the hours 'til the next day out.

"NOT CLEANING"

No one has been inside Matt's house for almost four months. It has just been Matt and his cat, hanging out, by themselves. Neither Matt nor his cat are particularly tidy. They have not hoovered or dusted or put away any clothes or even washed the dishes for quite some time. There is an enormous pile of dirty dishes wobbling next to the sink.

None of this bothers Matt or his cat. They are ok with mess. Now the government has announced it is fine to have visitors in your house again, Matt's mother has decided to call round. Now! This afternoon! In ten minutes! She is already on her way. Matt doesn't know what to do. His mother is not ok with mess. She will give him such a telling off when she sees the state of his house.

He doesn't have time to clean. Instead, Matt piles everything - all the dirty dishes, the unwashed clothes and recycling he hasn't bothered to sort out - into the spare room and closes the door. There is not much left in the house once all the mess has been removed. Only the furniture and Matt and the cat.

When his mother arrives, she is shocked by how empty the house is. She asks Matt if he has been burgled. He says he has. It is easier to lie to his mother than admit he has not cleaned anything in four whole months.

"UNDERGROUND HAIRCUT"

The hairdressers have not yet reopened.

It is still illegal to procure a haircut anywhere in the city, but I am desperate. I can barely see out from beneath my fringe.

My friend Melanie has given me the number for a woman who is running an underground beauty salon.

She will give me a quick trim for a tenner so long as I don't tell anyone.

The woman will not give me her name. She wishes to remain anonymous. She gives me the address of an empty house in the East of the city. I am told to arrive by ten.

"Go inside," the woman instructs me, "sit on the chair in the backroom and put the blindfold on. I can't risk having you see me while I'm cutting your hair."

I follow her instructions to the letter. I turn up promptly at ten. I sit on the chair. I wear the blindfold for the duration of my haircut.

I do not ask any questions. I do not see the woman's face, nor do I see her absolutely butchering my hair.

After the woman has left, I remove the blindfold and get a good look at my haircut. I have to wonder if she was even a hairdresser at all.

