THE WOMAN IN THE STREET

Christmas Day and she was out there with her hand- painted signs and the microphone and speaker system she wheeled up and down the street. I couldn’t see her, but I could hear her, and as far as I could tell, she was by Best Turkish Market, on the corner, exhorting one and all to Jesus, which I hadn’t the time for myself.

I was in the kitchen, cremating everybody’s lunch.

My daughter Stevie was over with Thomas and little Rose, my first and only grandchild, who wasn’t yet one. I heard them all and my husband baby-talking in the dining room.

The problem with lunch was that the oven was too small; the top of the turkey kept catching on the grill. I was crying from the smoke.

I pushed the window wide open and let in the woman’s voice.

She said:

Listen.

Hear what I say.

I say Thank you, oh Lord Jesus Christ.

I say Praise be to Him, Light of the World, Jesus Christ.

I say We only truly live in your love, Blessed Jesus Christ.

I say Jesus! but them have left us here to die.

I say Them build these towers too high, they block out the light. They cost too much, Jesus. They are ugly. They are mean.

I say Listen to me.

You hear what I say?

I say We got no rooms, no gardens, no parks. And now them want to bring diggers to tear our flowers away!

I say Jesus — the diggers are here!

I say Them must have dog hearts, Jesus, the way they take take take take. We have so little, but them take it away.

I say There is violence, Jesus. There is blood. There is pain. Fear lives here, Jesus. Fear lives in our hearts, eats us up every day.

I say Listen to me.

I say We have no voice.

I say We try, Jesus. We ask them for help. We ask the Council, we ask the Teachers, we ask the Government for help. We tell them these boys and girls are too young. Too young! Help us help us help us, we say. There is no way to live. The children, we tell them, they grow up too quick. They just babies, and then they disappear.

The woman stopped for a moment, and I saw, in my mind, lemon-yellow fingernails drumming one of her signs. Her make-up was always sunny and spirited. Her hair a wonder of domestic engineering. I would’ve asked where she went to have it done, but she was intimidating. A musty moth like me could only look on and admire.

The woman said:

Listen.

I say Listen.

I say My boy, my only son, where did he go?

To the Teachers, I say My little boy in his blue uniform, where did he go?

To the Council, I say This good boy, my dependant, who was always so good natured and polite, this boy, where did he go?

To the Government, I say This little citizen, born here and so beautiful, he was mine but yours as well. I say That boy, what happen? Where did my boy go?

I say Listen to me.

Please, listen.

The Teachers, they are quiet.

The Council, they don’t care.

I say There is no government. The government is gone.

Listen.

Please.

I pray to God.

I hope He hear me and He know me. I hope He see the mother, the woman, the human bein that I am.

I pray Please Lord Jesus Christ, look after all your child. Look after the boys who go church and do their prayers, the boys who believe in your Love and live in your Light.

I pray One boy, Jesus, tell me, where did he go?

I say to all of you Tell me, please, where did he go?

I say My only boy, my sweetest fruit, my smiley little man who used to run up and down this street.

I say He never stop his smilin, no matter what, even at the end.

I say Every day, I see his face. I see his smile.

I say Listen.

You don’t listen.

I say You will listen when you are dead.

Her voice became faint as she moved along the street. My second husband stormed into the kitchen and handed me an accusatory look. Stevie followed, holding baby Rose. I grabbed the girls—my family!— three generations in the here and now.

The woman in the street praised Jesus and Mary and Joseph, the Twelve Apostles, and the Angel Gabriel.

“Her again?” said my husband.

Stevie pulled a funny face at Rose. “Oh, oh, *oh*! Doesn’t that woman ever rest?”

Lovable Rose sucked her fist, which was fleshy and plump and yet so perilously small. “Don’t you do it!” I told her. “Don’t you grow up and individualise yourself. Stay babyish. Stay simple and safe. Your condition as a baby in this world does not defend you from all harm, but it does go some way to guard against many common accidents, violence, miscarriages of justice, and tragic events.”

“Mum!” Stevie said.

“She has a right to know what really goes on in the world. It may be a craven message, but it’s one from deep inside my life-worn heart.”

“Wherever it’s from, please leave it there. I read an article on one of the parenting websites that said babies remember words, sentences,, even when they don’t understand, they absorb it all, it said, every word we say.”

“You read an article for that? I could’ve told you that. How come you never ask me anything? Do you think you mothered yourself, weaned freely off the land?” I turned to Rose and adopted my baby-speaking voice. “Your mummy is lovely, but rather full of herself.”

“Mum!”

“We need to steer her away from this individualism. Guide her toward collectivist goals. More than ever this world needs its people to sing together in tune.”

Thomas shouted from the other room: “What’s going on in there? Is everything all right?”

“It’s nothing,” Stevie said. “Mum’s decided she’s a Communist again.”

“A Socialist,” I said.

“The CD’s finished,” Thomas said. “What do you want me to put on?”

“Whatever’s by the player,” Stevie said.

“I would like ‘Have a Tchaikovsky Christmas’. It’s the big red and white double case,” I said.

“Found it,” Thomas said.

As ‘Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’ tiptoed between our ears, I told my husband and Stevie what the woman had said, the story of her life as I’d heard it through the kitchen window.

My husband, ever true to himself, went upstairs to the loo.

“That’s so sad,” Stevie said.

“Sad?” I said. “Sad! It’s an atrocity. A war crime. Sad isn’t even close.”

“You know what I mean.”

“That woman has been failed by every institution constructed to support such a person in her terrible position. What happened to society? Where was the guiding hand of government to lift her from ruin? And so in her most understandable and endless desperation she turns to religion, those tricksters and racketeers in their towers of iniquity. That woman is a sign that the world is broken. It’s broken because we broke it.”

Stevie sat Rose on her hip. “That’s not entirely fair,” she said. “I would imagine she doesn’t wake up on a dark freezing morning and think to herself, Hurray, here’s to another day signifying society’s ills.”

 “Ills are pickpockets, shoplifters, sneezes, coughs, and a cold bed. I’d call this the corrupted condition of humanity’s communal soul.”

 “Either way,” Stevie said.

 “I think you think you’re making a point, but I am telling you, you’re not,” I said.

“My point is you’re using this woman as a place to dump your guilt and political agenda, and so deprive her of her own womanhood.”

“I’ve never heard such tripe! I was marching with the WLM while you were nary a twinkle in my eye. Showed those evil old bastards that a woman’s body is her own. Look outside. The streets you walk on are steeped in the blood of womanhood! My blood, not yours.”

Thomas shouted: “Are you two all right?”

“We’re busy,” Stevie said.

“What does that mean for lunch?”

“It means we’re going to need more gravy,” I barked. “This old bird is withering away.”

“Have you tried basting her?” he said.

“Get in here!” Stevie said.

Thomas came in and attended to the turkey, my husband took care of Rose, and Stevie and I went into the hallway, where there were more escape routes, and became thoroughly debased in a barbarous row. In one sense it only lasted half an hour, but in another sense it had started with Stevie’s first word—“Dadda”—and continued ever since.

 Stevie said: “You’re going to stand here in your big, warm house and moan. But that’s it. You’re a hypocrite and you know it.”

“Oh, *wow*. Did you get that from one of your fake articles online? You do know it’s the fate of all the mothers throughout time to be called hypocritical by their child? Especially by a daughter. You just wait.”

“What about sons?”

“Sons?” I said. “Sons! Haven’t you listened at all?”

Stevie threw me a face so characterful, I feared for her life. There is no hope in dreaming you can protect such a face—it will draw all the attention in the world.

“You know what?” I said. “I’m going to go out there right now.”

“And do what?”

“Something. Anything,” I said.

People! I thought as I stepped over the icy patches of pavement, the ever-widening cracks. The things we say and think and do and don’t do and regret. How much we have to hurt one another just by our daily goings on. Why must we be press ganged into conflict all the time? Why do the unaccountable mysteries of one’s life descend into silly plots? We’re all together on this journey to guaranteed mutual death; the least we could do is enjoy the company, hold hands, and kiss once in a while.