

Motherland

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For Guy

Ach, wir

*Die wir den Boden bereiten wollten für Freundlichkeit
Konnten selber nicht freundlich sein.*

Bertolt Brecht
'An die Nachgeborenen'

Oh, we

Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.

Bertolt Brecht
'To Those Born Later'

I

Selling the *Morning Star*

Tamworth, April 1978

It was never going to be easy selling socialism to a town like Tamworth. But here we were again pulling Saturday *Morning Stars* from our Co-op carrier bags. My mum filled her lungs with shopping precinct air – hot, sour and bloody from the butchers. She hauled her breath so hard you could hear it. It was the kind of last gasp you took as your ship went down.

‘The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth! *Morning Star!*’

Middle Entry precinct rang with shoppers shopping, with the click-clack of round bodies on sharp heels. I knew these women from every Saturday with their orange perms feathered at the neck, the sheen and clash of rayon, and glasses that made marbles of their eyes.

‘All right, bab.’

‘All right.’

‘How’s the babby?’

‘The babby’s doing all right, bab, ta very much.’ Which was the update on the new great-grandchild. They tipped round shoulders and beaked at each other’s trolleys, clawed at the multi-pack nappies and milk formula and now, just after Easter, at the half-price eggs which, with a bit of luck, should still be good for next year. And the babby’ll have teeth by then.

‘*Morning Star!* Twelve pence and cheap at the price.’

Tamworth loved a bargain. Shop windows fluoresced with

offers, spelt as they sounded, the lettering unplanned. And Tamworth bought in bulk. People with a car drove to the industrial estate and filled the boot at the Cash & Carry. Everyone else wheeled a trolley round the market, laying up supplies for a rainy day. My mum and I did too, except we shopped for Armageddon, for the day the Americans pressed the button and started World War Three. Our kitchen cupboards were full of the packets and tins that would see us through the End of the World and ever having to cook.

Now the church struck noon. St Editha's counted out every quarter-hour of Tamworth time. There'd been four hundred and forty thousand of them so far – rounding down for the sake of morale. But we had three clocks on our living-room wall set to Havana, Moscow and Hanoi time. At home, I lived in any zone I wanted of the Eastern Bloc.

'On sale for one hour only! *Morning Star!*'

Most weeks, someone with a strut and a smirk winked at us and called 'Morning!' back. Or they made a show of checking their watch and told us it was the afternoon.

'Only ten copies left! Hurry, hurry!'

There was no rush, even though the whole town was in town. Or nearly. The posh Tammies were in Lichfield and Ashby sniffing antiques and plants for the patio. But the old Tammies were here, the ones who lived in red-brick terraces with dangerous wiring and wallpaper their grandfathers had hung. And the new Tammies, the Birmingham Overspill, who lived in cul-de-sacs with spillage in the name: Redlake, Seaton, Waveney, Purbrook.

Now my mum spotted a pupil. 'Mandi-with-an-i. Ex, but only just.' She waved so wide the whole precinct thought she knew them. My mum was primed for pupils. She spotted them a mile off and knew all their names. She taught in a school in the Warwickshire coalfields where hundreds of children came from a handful of families, dishing out maps of the world to pupils who never left the village. Or if they did, it was to take

the bus all the way to Tamworth for a shopping expedition. Mandi came over with a baby in a buggy, and a toddler trailing Smarties on the floor.

‘I didn’t know!’ my mum said to the pale lump squashed into the pushchair. The chewing gum was called Darren. Four months old.

‘This your daughter, Miss? Looks like you, don’t she, Miss.’

My mum did chit-chat about babies and breastfeeding. She nudged me in the ribs. She’d never have been milked to nothing at the hospital if I’d been able to keep up with production. Her chest size was all my fault. She made Mandi laugh and made an easy sale. She was good at hearts-and-minds, my mum. ‘Hearts, anyway,’ she always said. Sometimes, when she was feeling maudlin, she said, ‘I’m the queen of hearts,’ because according to the song, ‘To the queen of hearts is the ace of sorrow, he’s here today, he’s gone tomorrow.’ Which was true. My dad didn’t die the day after they’d met, but he wasn’t around for long. And anyone who’d come after had only ever stayed one night.

My mum called out, ‘Only nine left! Hurry or you’ll miss it! *Morning Star!*’ Our voices swelled under the Perspex roof. It was why we chose the pitch – to sound mass, my mum said, because that was the point, the masses, and to be here every week regardless of the weather. She checked the front page. ‘Carter shelves neutron bomb! No modernising Lance!’ Whoever he was. The neutron bomb wasn’t actually today’s headline, but it was catchier than ‘Tory brew stinks of apartheid’. And my mum was big on peace, and she was big on people. And on people being peaceful. On being nice. Not killing each other, if possible.

But there was no rush to ban the bomb.

Maybe Tamworth didn’t mind. After the neutron bomb, the town would still look like its picture postcards: St Editha’s, the Riverside Flats, the Castle, the Castle Pleasure Grounds where geese padded about near the crazy golf, hoping for crusts from the crazy golfers. My mum puffed with the effort and the heat.

She blew air down her front. It was baking for April, the first hot day for as long as I could remember. She pulled off her sweater and tied it round her waist. Underneath, what she had on yesterday: a *Sixty Years of Socialism* T-shirt, the red turned pink, the hammer and sickle flaking because of Co-op own-brand powder. The T-shirt clung to her chest. You couldn't help noticing how flat it was, and skinny enough to count the ribs.

Sometimes, in front of the bathroom mirror, when my mum did a demi-plié for a dibble with her colour-coded flannels, she said she had a ballet dancer's body. When she was eight, my mum wanted to be a ballet dancer. It was just after the war, and in 1945 anything seemed possible – even for a girl from Bermondsey who spent the first years of her life sleeping in the bottom drawer of the bedroom chest. Even for the daughter of a cabbie and a cook. And later, she wanted to be a diplomat and tour the world for peace. But she didn't have a chance, not with a Saturday job in Woolies, schoolgirl French and no idea of cunning.

Now she tugged the T-shirt from her trousers and flapped air up at the waist. She looked at her belly. It was white and empty. We hadn't had anything since breakfast. We'd been up since seven, which was two in the afternoon on Hanoi time and how we put it to give ourselves a lie-in. We'd eaten the usual as usual – boiled eggs and soldiers, three-and-a-half minutes, Soviet soldiers. All morning, we'd sat in our pyjamas at the living-room table and ploughed through TODOs. Today, it was minutes: Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, National Union of Teachers, Communist Party. I'd dictated from my mum's jumbo pad, the pages dug deep with her oversized blackboard hand. My mum didn't actually need me. She could touch-type. She could even type and talk – have one sentence coming out of her fingers and another out of her mouth. But it was quicker if I read her notes back to her, just short of speaking speed and dropped a few tones, like a 45 set to 33. And being quick mattered because there was always the question of Time. “Man's

dearest possession”,’ my mum said. Which wasn’t true. And she knew she was misquoting. *Life* was actually man’s dearest possession. But *Life* was measured by Time, and there was never enough of it. So I read, and my mum’s hands flew across the keyboard, and our house filled with the sound of the alphabet punching paper – landing softer blows since we’d got an electric. And in the background, *Tiswas* murmured through the wall from Ron and Reg’s.

Now I nudged my mum. The butcher was throwing us dirty glances across his polished glass – which he did every week, but these looks were especially lethal. He’d probably spotted her hammer and sickle. He had a Union Jack in his window, and sold English meat to English people who cooked English food. Today he had an offer on Lichfield lamb. In this town, they killed and ate their own. He shook his head at us, dipping bloody fingers into a tray fringed with fake green lawn. He tossed a joint into the air, onto the scales, and stared at us as he sharpened his knife. I tugged my mum’s T-shirt. She knew what I meant. She’d have loved to head to the Co-op café for a sit-down and some fuel. At our elbows, speechless parents and boys who’d make genital sculptures from their sausage and mash. But, ‘quarter of an hour yet, Jess’. My mum never gave up early. My mum never gave up. Sometimes towards the end of the hour, she wound down like a gramophone and let the vowels slide, aiming her pitch at the butcher’s as the ‘Moan ’n Stare’. Most weeks, though, she tailed off with a song, sung in a half-voice because of the boom of the roof, taking her cue from the news. Now I heard her run through a first verse, checking she had all the words: “‘Don’t you hear the H-bomb’s thunder, echo like the crack of doom? While they rend the skies asunder, fallout makes the earth a tomb . . .”

But that was as far as she got because a man came out of the butcher’s and lumbered over to us, see-sawing his weight between wide-set legs, his dead meat swinging in a carrier bag. He was neckless, pointy-headed, monumental, and tall

and close enough to cut out all our light. ‘I’ll buy one of them off you.’

‘Pardon?’ My mum hadn’t expected it. Neither had I. He didn’t look like a *Morning Star* reader. But then not many people did.

‘I’ll have one of them papers.’ His face was engraved with politeness, but I didn’t like the look of him – the beige shirt blotched black with sweat, the pock-marked skin that fifty years ago must have weathered acne. But my mum didn’t notice. She did maracas. ‘Here we go, Jess! Two down! Good-oh!’

The man took a copy and held it at arm’s length, leafing through it, showing us his knuckles mossy with hair. I thought he looked familiar, but then everyone in Tamworth did. Everyone knew everyone and everyone was related. Even though the town was famous for its railway junction. Lines ran north–south and east–west, which meant you could leave Tamworth in any direction you wanted, but hardly anyone did. You were born here, married here, and you died here. And that’s when I placed him. This man worked at the Co-op Funeral Service, the one with the sign that said *Our Limousines Are Available For Weddings*. I’d see him on the way to school. Some mornings he swung an arm around the window, hanging a sign for a bargain burial, or replacing the flowers – fresh lilies for dead ones, when dead was surely the point.

Now he reached the back page and skimmed Cayton’s tips for Newbury and the winners at Kempton. He rolled up his *Star* and tucked it under an arm. ‘It must be hard for you trying to flog this.’ Actually, every Saturday we cleared all ten because we put the unsolds around the Co-op Furniture Department – on nests of tables and bedside cabinets, on three-seater suites, sideboards, pouffes and garden-loungers, as if every modern home took the paper. Sometimes we went back at the end of the day to see if the *Stars* were still there. They never were, which my mum took as proof. ‘The paper needs the money,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t matter who pays for them as long as we get the message out. As long as it’s read.’

The man toppled his weight towards us, his stubby feet in socks and sandals. ‘You know, I pity you. Here you are every week and no one’s the least bit interested. Everyone’s against you.’

‘Not *no one*. Not *everyone*.’

‘In this town, all people want is the *Herald*.’

We took the *Tamworth Herald* too to see if they’d published our letters. We wrote every week to the editor – about peace, unemployment, racism. And because we’ve got to stay in touch, my mum said, with how real people live. Sometimes she said ‘real’, sometimes ‘working class’. What she meant was: we have to know who they are, these people who should be on our side, but aren’t yet.

The man said, ‘All you need’s the *Herald* and a hobby. Them’s enough to fill your time.’ Because that’s what you did with Time in this town: filled it. Because you weren’t born with a life, but a giant hole. Though actually what the man said was: ‘the *Erald* and an obby’. Everyone in Tamworth had a hobby-without-an-h: ome-brewing, up-olstery, istory. And especially istory. The town loved itself for it. We went back to Offa and his dyke and right back to the Romans. Watling Street ran through the town. My mum took it to work, which was handy because she was often under-slept and the A5 was straight and didn’t need steering.

Now the man looked us up and down. He flicked his eyes between us and found the likeness – the same face, the same build. We were the same person except for twenty-eight years and half an inch. ‘Runs in the family, I take it.’ Which was true. We came from a long line of dead communists: my grandparents, great-uncles and aunts. Even my dad, who joined the Communist Party before he was old enough – they let him in early he was so keen. And he died before he was old enough too, and they let him in early there. Wherever that was: heaven, hell, limbo, in a tin in my mum’s knicker drawer. Our whole family was Jewish or Scottish, on the run from Hitler or the midges. One branch ended up in the East End, near Cable

Street. They sent their children to the International Brigades and lost them all in Spain. Some of my family were locked up in Franco's prison camps and had their skulls measured for the fascists. My nan spent the Second World War making jumpers for the Red Army. The whole country had knitted for Stalin. Then after the war, my mum joined the Young Communist League and sold *Challenge* down the docks. She had a long history of flogging unpopular papers.

The man reached round and felt in his back pocket. 'How much do I owe you?'

'Just have it,' my mum said. 'Present. I'm just glad if it's read.'

When he brought back his hand, it held a lighter. He ran a thick thumb over the flint, the nail cloudy and probably dead. It took a few goes. Then the cough of ignition and the tip of the flame tonguing the air. He held it against the paper. A corner crept from yellow to brown to black. But the fire wouldn't take. He had to fan the *Star* and force the flames to chew their way through the news. Then he fanned it under our nose. The air above the paper wavered with the heat. I looked across to the butcher's, where phantom figures jeered. He said, 'That's what we did in them olden days when there were trouble. Burned it.'

By now a crowd had gathered. People wondered at a distance if it was bad enough for 999. They repeated the telly safety ad: *get down, roll over, call help*. A story drifted over about a neighbour who'd died after home-made doughnuts. He put water on a chip pan and could only be identified from his teeth. I glanced at my mum. Her mouth was clamped shut, her eyes closed and tears forming. I wasn't sure what kind they were – chemical ones or sadness. My mum was full of water, even more than they said in the biology book. Just the *Nine O'Clock News* could bring it on – tears flicked onto the living-room tiles where they took a long time to dry. And all the while her hands tore at each other, leaving white flecks in her lap.

Now my mum felt for my hand. She wove our fingers together,

fixing us to the spot. Through closed lips so as not to inhale, 'Just think of the guerrillas. Think of the Vietnamese.' So I shut my eyes and thought: whole villages turned to smoke and the air sucked from the sky. Tared bodies, the water boiled out of them, and a girl, naked, full of ribs, skin falling off, her arms like broken wings.

When I opened my eyes, the man was gone. White flakes had settled on my shoes. It was Tamworth and hot and April, but that could have been snow. My mum picked the paper from her hair and dusted down her Soviet chest. On the floor, what remained of the news – the neutron bomb, the Tory brew – fingered the air as if it were alive. I turned to my mum and looked up half an inch to a face full of ash and angles, to her insurmountable bones. The sun poured down, taking away her colours, turning her black and white – her complicated face made simple.

'Can we go home now?'

'Or the Co-op? You hungry?'

I felt sick. 'What we going to do?'

My mum slipped an arm around my waist and pulled me to her, joining us at the hip. 'We're going to soldier on, Jess. You know that. We'll. Just. Soldier. On.'