

14:33

Miranda Overett
Flash fiction, 2019

First, the noise.

A tannoy shrieks, a hundred phones blasting alerts. The kind of sound that carries panic; a head ringing, heart racing, braced-for-disaster kind of sound.

Next, the silence.

Not just a shocked loss for words, but an ominous quiet as everyone breathes in, waiting. Even the seagulls hover, reluctant to ruin the moment with wing beats or falling chips. The tannoy crackles.

“This is an urgent public safety announcement. The British government has announced a state of nuclear emergency, with incoming missiles expected to strike London and Brighton at 14:33 local time. Residents are advised to seek shelter immediately, in secure spaces below ground -”

My watch is glowing 14:27. It has to be a joke. A hoax, a cruel disruption. The end of the world doesn't come on sunny Sunday afternoons.

I grab my phone, check social media, the news - but instead of the usual barrage of baby photos and politics, every page is jammed by the same message.

A state of nuclear emergency. It doesn't make any sense. It can't. But a rumble of voices is growing around me - frantic phone calls, frightened appeals, an incongruent laugh, quickly stifled - and the peaceful laziness of the day has shattered.

Maybe it isn't happening.

Five minutes ago we were walking amongst the deckchairs, our clasped hands clammy in the heat. I don't know why wedge heels seemed like an easy option, but everything was perfect. Definitely not death and destruction weather.

I left Nat in line for mini-golf, watching a group of giggling 60-somethings take erratic swings at windmills, plastic crocodiles and - for some reason - a miniature Boeing 747. A brief whiff of their lunchtime chardonnay followed me down the pier, past arcade machines and leering pigeons, towards the ice cream van.

Ice cream is a tradition for us. Tiramisu-bubblegum for her, banoffee mint-choc-chip for me. The first time we ever dared to date we came right here - to the intersection of hipster flavour combinations and olde worlde day at the seaside - and realised we both have appalling taste in ice cream. It felt right, learning something new about her just as our shared world shifted.

I was watching the waves and wondering whether to take the plunge and go for a peanut butter-melon combo when it happened.

Nat. She's still there, by the windmill, looking at her phone, looking for me. Her eyes find mine, and I know she'll wait for me.

How easily I can I run in a maxi skirt and heels? Does the hypothetical end of the world justify sprinting in my underwear? Will my shoes fit in my handbag? They were on sale, and -

- and Nat lost the shoes she wore on our wedding day. Abandoned somewhere during our stumble through the honeysuckle-heavy garden, sneaking away from dangerously tipsy uncles, desperate for a moment alone. Neither of us has ever been much good in heels.

Nat.

And before I know it, I'm hurdling a plastic hippo, bare feet slapping against hot wooden slats, skirt tucked into my knickers. I hope Nat will think I look impromptu-action-woman cool. I almost certainly don't.

I swear the pier has stretched in the last 30 seconds. I've never particularly wished for proximity to mini golf, but now I do - desperately - it feels miles away. I join the wave of people making their way back towards the promenade, our chaotic momentum exaggerated by the slick of discarded icecream underfoot.

Ahead, though! A brief glimpse of grey-blond hair, a sky-blue dress determinedly clambering up the Boeing, Nat's pale arm waving. Despite everything, I have to smile. We grew up on rom-com moments; of course now I'm running to reach her plane.

Nat was always my extra ticket to the cinema, my company for the dreamy-eyed commentary after. She was even there in the next seat, avoiding eye contact as Tom, my woeful first attempt at a proper boyfriend, snickered through Imagine Me and You then tried to put his hand up my skirt. For years, no-one cared - it was sweet that Nat and I were so close. But then she met Victoria, and suddenly it wasn't so sweet anymore.

Desperately wading forwards, I'm blocked by a sea of pushchairs, altogether more frightening than the waves lapping at the edges of the pier. I pause - maybe there's an easier way through? But all of a sudden the tannoy is squawking again, and I'm running; pushing my way through, elbows raised, skirt billowing from my knickers, picking up speed... fuelled by that old belly-deep fear that I'll never see her again.

It seemed so easy for her to come out, inviting me casually to join her and Victoria for drinks at a trendy queer arcade, turning up hand in hand. I hated Nat then - hated her for daring to throw neon darts at rainbow-covered dart-boards with her pretty, smiling girlfriend. The hate walked me out into the cool air, glitter-covered dart still digging into my palm. And then I hated Nat for not following me.

...I hit the ground, hard - a rogue beachball underfoot. Vision skewed, I can see my watch, arm pressed against the warm wood. 14:31. Ahead, a chillingly practical man is taking wild swings at the crowd with a folded-up deckchair. Struggling to my feet, I stumble backwards to avoid a fuchsia woman in kitten heels who has appeared out of nowhere, charging towards him, golf club raised. As they collide, I smell chardonnay again.

Nat was drinking chardonnay the next time I saw her. It was a few weeks after Victoria - we went somewhere quiet and familiar, to talk. I drank too much wine and told her everything, holding her hand and praying she wouldn't make me let go. She didn't. Instead, she kissed me.

The chardonnay woman, victorious, elbows her way back to her tribe. They're close by, clustered around the Boeing. They're next to Nat. I leap forward, diving into Chardonnay's slipstream.

And I kissed her back. I'd slept in her bed so many nights in childhood, we'd spent so many hours sprawled next to one another - but this was a closeness I barely knew how to believe.

She's in front of me now. Nat. And she's waiting for me - anxious eyes and practical hands, barefoot too. Good thinking, we're both *so bad* in heels.

We married in summer, in a beautiful house in the countryside. My dad refused to come, so Nat's sat on my side of the aisle after he gave her away, which made me cry.

Her hand is outstretched. She's got candyfloss in her hair. I think my eye is bleeding.

I reach out, and her hands are in mine. Beside us, the Boeing disappears; swept away by the force of the mini golfers.

I've always wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

I'm just in time to wrap my arms around her with all the love I have to give.

I still do.

It's 14:33.