

#jollop

This is an unedited transcript of the tweet experiment Alastair Cook and Nada Cabani, tweeted during August and September 2009.

This was played out at <http://twitter.com>

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As at 25th September 2009.

Prologue

She stood still. The water ebbed, pulling sand from between her toes; sinking gently, she looked down and took a step forward. He watched her from behind the lenses; he liked to do that. He liked to hold her body in the frame, contre-jour.

Balancing, she outstretched her leg, remembering the years of practice. She pushed up onto her tiptoe and toppled into the sea. He winced; his face now spasms of throbbing, minuscule grimaces. 'She's going for it', he thought, as he bit his lower lip. Her breath held; she pulled herself underwater and felt her lower half-twitch, changing. She opened her eyes and began to breathe. He knew he had to act fast but didn't move. He just stood there, staring at the spot where she dived, his camera shutter jammed. She swam freely, exercising her tired muscles. She had forgotten the taste of salt, the muted sounds and the light above. How she missed him.

She missed him most when he was holding her. She missed the way he held her, before the accident. They had been so carefree, so absorbed. Resting at the shoreline beneath the trees, her mind flooded with memories. The tears came.

'You don't cling to tears simply because they come to you, but out of conceit', she thought as she rubbed her eyes. He'd been tall, chiselled and still, calming; reduced now to a blur of ticks and twitches hidden behind a lens. She needed to see him. He was now walking towards her, his silhouette a faded negative against the backdrop of the long, sandy beach. She turned squinting into the sun. She knew immediately it was him. He stopped dead, twitched, lilted left. She felt a kick inside. Swallowing, she walked toward him, her skin prickling. The sun shadow hid his face. She had been hiding too, from him, from them both. How she wished she could become one of those negatives he littered their bedroom with; black, flat and glossy. She could then lie in a pile on the floor, unnoticed and neglected, nibbled at by dust, forgotten and just fade away. Moving around her, he let her see his face. He smiled, tired eyes creased; she felt her heart lift. Maybe she was brave enough after all.

'This is it', she thought, 'this was the moment to tell him'. How ugly he suddenly seemed to her; strong, infallible & ugly, the way serene people are, the way she used to be before she started to lie to him.

The heat of the midday sun dug into her back, a cat's claws burning her skin. She closed her eyes & waited for the sound of her voice. She clawed the words out, gravel scratching her dry throat.

"It's not yours."

His twitching seemed to stop, arrested. Breath held, she felt the adrenalin wash through her, pulling her under again. She dived. The blow was so unexpected, so fast, she felt it only as she hit the ground. She cowered immediately, hunkering down, curling up. She could sense him above her, hear his tears; she lay still. She felt her shoulder throb; she felt a kick inside and smiled.

I

James sat on the edge of his bed, sleep still settled in his body; he hated this routine. A shard of pain drove through his temple. Lifting himself up carefully, he felt his way to the door, sparks of bright pain puncturing the black. He flicked the switch. Eyes shut, James listened to the house. He heard the timber expanding, warming under his feet. The dull pulse in his head slowed. He held fast to the doorframe and breathed in. The rain scattered across the pane and his heart slowed; he opened his eyes.

Light cut a knife behind his eyes; he killed the switch and let his pupils relax. He didn't need light to know she was gone. He sat down on the bed in darkness, the pattering rain cooling the warm house. He was late. But that had never been a problem. A sudden, sharp stab cut through the end of his spine. He bit on his lower lip and waited for the spasm to shatter his senses. His dad had taught him that; it was what he did when he was a boy, because lads bled and only girls cried. His father had been a disciplinarian. A user of words rather than force; the words had stayed with James. He missed him. He'd been calm when his dad died, the cancer pulling away his words, silencing him, shrinking him. He forgave him everything.

With his left hand, he held onto the bathroom door's handle as the spasm in his spine eased. This was Sara's favourite room and the largest in the flat. When the girls were small, she called it her office and installed a Formica table in the corner, under the south-facing window, where she worked on her thesis. On it, her toiletries mingled with academic journals, half-opened purple sanitary boxes and a crystal ashtray, the one James gave her for her fortieth.

He let go of the door handle and took the six, long steps to the washbasin. Grimacing with pain, he watched the water pour out of the tap and, with one hand holding the edge of the sink for support, he squeezed the face flannel with the other, before rubbing his face, vigorously. The firm massaging movements soothed him, like so many other movements do: patting his fingers on his knee when thinking about a

new drawing is another one, and hugging Sara. But that was before her affair with the post-doc student, and his accident. He leant over, flicking the toilet seat down with force, the bright clatter echoing in his head. Sitting, he let the tears come. How could she could she why the children oh fucking Christ pull it together hold it in boys don't cry sing the song let it go. James wiped his hands on his legs and looked down with some disgust. On your feet soldier! He ran the shower and stepped in.

The water prickled James's back, pin-pricking pain cracking the pulse in his head open. He couldn't bear this, couldn't think. The gush bounced and splashed off him as he twitched and convulsed. He cupped his balls, watching his hand jerk spasmodically. Pathetic sexless useless, he thought. As he turned, a twitch slipped his grasping hand from the shower edge; he fell heavily. James flew the taps blinked nose broken arm under body pissing bloody idiot. He lay still, taking stock, absorbing the shock. The ricochet ripped through the house, causing shock stillness in the four inhabitants: they moved as one towards the stairs.

II

Prof. Sara Levidow Smith goes through the morning routine as one would a dictionary; that is, with precision & a sense of wonder. As she brushes her teeth, she studies her sleepy features: her deep green, almond-shaped eyes, the way her eyebrows join above her small, short nose, giving her round face a sense of purpose, and seriousness. Her hair is now thinner than she would have liked, but the new grey shades mingle in harmony with her natural blond. Not mingle, she corrects herself. Imprecision in the English language irritates her; it distorts grammar and is a style increasingly celebrated by lazy newspaper columnists, and by those young scholars that she now supervises. As she applies the moisturizer cream to her neck, her thoughts turn, with precision, to James. His initially charming and beguiling disorganisation had slowly seeped through her rule-bound life, leaving a damp stain. She looks in the mirror, aware that irritation has accelerated the application of her ablutions and stops. She will not cry. She runs her index finger back and forth along the small scar on her cheek, almost invisible now. Routine, she thinks, routine.

Routine, that favourite shawl's cosy warmth: predictable, certain, consistent, repetitive, safe. It took 30 days to rip the shawl of habits to shreds, and her whole life with it. All that remains now are the shreds and her reflection in the mirror, painful and sore, resembling broken, incestuous desires. Sara sees a woman she no longer recognizes; a stranger. She shuts her eyes in alarm: there are times like these when looking makes you see, when you wish yourself blind. In her mind's eyes, she sees James. He's behind her, his fingers slowly tracing two parallel lines down the nape of her neck. A familiar moisture rises in her and desiring him becomes a tired serenade of predictable lust. Her mind shifts fast. She's now in the kitchen. Back in time to that damned November evening. James is there. She can see him clearly now, standing by the steaming window, wearing the grey chequered jumper she bought him for Christmas; how he hated that jumper and how he insisted on wearing it every day. Sara, too, hated it: that's why she bought it for him.

That jumper's ugliness, its exaggerated patterns and disorientated colours united them in a comfortable, conjugal neurosis. It became the symbol of their union: that of disintegrating slippers; the farmers' market trips they made together; the books they pretended to read and later pretended to discuss in long, hallow monologues, monologues littered with faint whispers of indignation, but more often of agreement. That November night, James stood there drinking straight from the bottle; Sara knew instantly that he had spoken to his father. Frank Zappa's voice crackled in the background and with it, her heart. James had loved his father. He had been a constant throughout, a hand-holding father, collecting James's failures like badges. Sara remembered his face, open, kind. 'Hungry Freaks Daddy' drifted in the background. The left behinds of the great society. Cancer. The disease had been developing unnoticed for ten years and was considered inoperable. It finished off James as well. The funeral had been well attended, given the weather. The noise! A constant pitter-patter on plastic, tears masked by rain.

Sara shudders uncomfortably and sits down, distracted by memory. The old freaks had been out in force that day, muted in black. The old wooden chair tilts to one side

and Sara's balance with it: the jar of face cream she'd been holding slips from her hand and smashes to pieces on the tiled floor. She gets up slowly, reaches for the bathroom door and locks it. Then she turns around, slides her feet out of her slippers and steps in the pool of cream and broken glass.

The coolness of the cream holds her feet safe. She moves tentatively, nudging glass pieces around, willing one to cut her. Routine, she thinks, routine. She moves forward slowly. Fuck routine. She moves deliberately. Fuck all of this; she loves him. The cream is warming, her patience thinning, the clock ticking. Turning, she steps out of the cream onto a piece of dry floor.

'Mum!! Are you there? It's dad! He's hurt himself!'. Sara's heart raced. What startles us is not what we fear, she thought, but what we grow to expect. Fear is that realization, that attempt, to throw yourself in the grave as the coffin was being lowered and knowing, all along, that clinging to that 'other' is but an illusion, an existentialist sob. Love is conceit, a mirror to groom one's reflection, to powder it, and colour it. The key jams in the door.