

Small Talk
by Laura Morgan

And the days are not full enough

And the nights are not full enough

Ezra Pound

What with the rain and you not here, I've found myself having imaginary to-and-fros about stuff long past. Usually I speak to people when I'm out with the dog – a hello, a wave – but I haven't seen anyone for days. I've not even been to the shops, and have been living mainly off carrots and lentils. And butter beans, sometimes butter beans. My car sits in the drive and every day I look out and it's still in the same spot, going nowhere.

So today I sorted out a few things with people in my head. One conversation lasted thirty minutes, which was the time it took to make lentil soup and wash the blender. There were moments when we got quite heated, she and I, and I suppose then I must have been talking out loud because the dog woke up and stared at me. But it was good, good to sort stuff out with people I hadn't seen for years.

There are all these things I need to catch up on, and so I write a list. It takes a whole page in my spiral-bound notepad

make soup

fill bird feeders

brush dog

and I immediately score out the soup. Scoring things out helps me think less about you – stuck on your oil rig, which drones and clanks through the night.

I see the coalman from the window when he opens the gate and backs his truck into the drive. I wave, like you always do. Perhaps the wave is a little vague – it might look like I'm stretching or whatnot, or with it being brighter outside, maybe he can't see in, the way the sun is – but anyway he doesn't wave back. If you were here, you'd go outside and speak to him. You'd sweet talk him, in that affable way you have, into letting you keep the nylon tonne bag, leading into it with observations on the weather and how you're still burning broken shed boards from the terrible storm two years ago. (We've lived here long enough now to compare winters and weave this knowledge into our small talk. Or at least you would – I merely sit inside making an indistinct wave-cum-stretch.)

I ordered a bag of kindling with this delivery, because I ran out shortly after you left and you've told me never to touch your axe. As it is, and while I'm being honest, I'll tell you that I did touch your axe, shortly after I ran out of kindlers and specifically for this purpose; I attempted to waggle the handle to loose it from the chopping block, but it wouldn't budge, and I felt then that there was no point in trying because the whole venture seemed doomed.

Left to himself, rather than setting the tonne bag to one side and letting me stack the wood at my leisure, the coalman upends the whole thing in the drive. Probably he assumes you are at home to carry the logs he's dumped – blocking my car in, by the way – to the woodpile. He doesn't realise I'll have to stack them on my own. Though in truth, he wouldn't care. They are used to hardier women up here – women who can loose an axe from its block and chop their own kindlers. Like those fisher wives in Whaligoe and the sailors they rescued from that wreck – remember I bought a booklet about it in the café after our walk? It was a dark night in 18-something and the women

carried the half-drowned men up to the salt room but the fire there had gone out, so they stripped the sailors of their wet clothes, and then took off all their own, and lay with these strangers whom the night had petrified. Imagine. Unyielding skin and bodies so cold they had no smell but the silver one of the sea.

After the coalman leaves, I go to put it all away. I carry a couple of logs at a time, and stack them in rows in the byre, just like you would. It takes me ages though, going out between sleet and rain, the damp patches on my wax coat covered in sawdust. When I'm finished, I get a sheep feed carton, blown into our garden in a storm, and pick up the odds and sods from the drive – bits of bark, and the long haphazard shavings from the splitter.

This afternoon I filled in my tax return

no no no zero tick no cross my heart & hope to die

and practised butterfly kisses on the dog's muzzle. I wasn't sure if he would feel it through that tight hair of his, but he must have, because he shot me a look (and not the sort of crinkle-eyed giggles you'd get from a child). Shortly after, he insisted on going outside. I watched him through the patio doors, lying out there on his own. The wind blew dead leaves round him but he didn't move. We are harried by dead leaves – huge brown ones from the sycamore. It's uncomfortable living with all that death rustling round the deck. Each night I take a few in when I carry the log basket back to the house. I like to watch their contorted fingers in the stove – a twitch and then they burn to nothing.

The birds haven't come back. I realised it this morning when I looked out at the damp garden and the bare tree, the seed-feeders untouched since I filled them two days ago. I took them down during the worst of the wind but you'd think the birds would've returned by now. Surely, no?

I haven't had my period for twenty-nine days. I think about doing a pregnancy test but it's silly – you've been away almost as long. The kit is there in the bathroom cupboard though, and I think about it every time I go in there to pee – which is about all I'm doing in there at the moment, because I decided last week to stop showering. My mind has been going round and round in the same grooves since you left, and I thought I might divert myself by breaking some physical cycle.

So I've been washing with a flannel at the sink, and it's only now, after five days, that I think my bits might have a whiff, and even so, it isn't strong enough to be perceptible through my jeans. We're all very paranoid these days – clean, but completely insecure. Besides, being clean isn't everything. I bet that man behind the post office counter in town showers every day, and he's just a petty jobsworth.

The other thing I've been doing lately is leaving my washing on the clothes horse until it dries in unshakeably firm folds, and just picking things off as I need them.

You phone tonight. I tell you about the coalman, and filling the bird feeders, and about the courier who dropped off your new surfboard (you spend your whole time on the rig ordering things on the net – surf wax, booties – and I'm sure you lie in your bunk at night imagining the boxes piled in our hall). I don't tell you about the not showering, or the clothes horse, or my not having been

out for days, because these things would worry you (and in turn, you don't tell me about crane ops falling asleep with suspended loads or high-pressure hoses writhing like snakes – stuff like this only ever comes out later, in drunken conversations with friends). We talk about the guy in the cabin next to you who snores, about chicken stew with pieces of bone in, and about the weather – hot and humid with you, same as always with me.

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It will be relaxing to have a bath, I think. I should really have a shower first, rather than bathe in my own dirt, but I don't (the truth is your wetsuit, hood and rash vest are still hanging up in there, and the suit's hollow legs would be hanging at my face) and so I just get straight into the bath, stepping from foot to foot until the heat is bearable and then easing myself down. After a while, I rest my feet on the taps.

There's that photo I took, remember? I had painted toenails – we were just back from holiday or something – and I shouted you to get the camera while I sat there like a queen in all those bubbles, the damp haired loosed from my bun just starting to curl, and all this must have been yonks ago because you came back with that Philips digital camera – like an actual camera – and later I had to plug it in to upload the picture to my laptop, and it was all because of my red toenails, and how striking they looked, cropped like that against a background of Arctic white, of bath and bubbles, the photo stark and sanguine at the same time.

But tonight my feet are just feet – horrid things really and I look at them, there on the taps. Baths are always like that though. Unless you're reading or you pop a facecloth over your eyes, you're left staring at something – a wall or a radiator, maybe a cabinet and a tube of toothpaste – and instead

of feeling relaxed, you're filled with the futility of everything, of that exhausting heat. Then when you absent-mindedly move a leg, you're surprised by how light the water sounds, and frankly it's just annoying, how lightly the water tinkles and swirls.

Tonight I stare at my feet on the taps – feet that don't have painted toes, and yet I count back the months, getting as far as three springs ago, and still can't think when it was that photo was taken. The taps are freezing, by the way, with little droplets of condensation that trickle into one another.

It's because of this – of this tiring half-hour trying to remember things and staring at my feet – that I don't stand up like I'd usually do, but stay in the bath as the water runs out. The bubbles get lower and closer to my skin. They shiver a little, become more spread out. By the time the water is an inch above me they have thinned so much that only the smaller ones remain. Impatient, I raise my body to receive them, and they hush into a lace that covers me from abdomen to solar plexus. The feeling is physical; they cling to me, emptied of air, like some pretty fungus on a tree trunk.

Anyway, it doesn't last, the lace, because I feel the water at my buttocks now, finding it's level between my legs, yoked to itself in the gap under my knees, and so I scoop it onto my skin. The last of the heat, just a lukewarm handful, laps my belly. It takes a couple of goes, but the soap lace melts – a white trace stencilled there for a moment and then it's gone, and all is shining flesh. The water is gone too – very almost, so I hurry and stand up, because to be left lying in a plastic bath with no water would be just too awful.

I still haven't had my period. That's thirty-four days, and I know, of course, that I've been late before, and I don't have any real symptoms as such, but women don't always, do they? I lift my shirt and let the dog smell my

stomach – which looks and feels very much like a stomach and not a receptacle for life. I'm sure he'd know, if there was something in there. I watch him for signs, and he does seem to sniff rather hard – a few short breaths followed by a long snort.

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My mother calls. She wants to know if I'm lonely with you gone. I say no, and ask her about the garden birds – why it is they haven't come back. A fox or a cat, she thinks.

What I said wasn't a lie. After all there are different kinds of loneliness, and I've been very busy with the things on my list. I'm not the kind of wallow-in-bed lonely, and I'm not the phone-up-all-your-friends lonely either. But then there is a multitude of loneliness out there, a multitude of people, all with their own kind, and to label it as one thing is almost impossible. We would need individual tags, with just a number, which could be cross-referenced on a big database. I would be loneliness model 9574 or something, which sounds like a phone number in an old film: *Hello? Lonelyheath, 9574?*

Sometimes I imagine a baby here. I feel the surprising way she fits my curved arm, the denseness of her tiny padded bum. I hear the snuggle of breath through nostrils still acquainting themselves to this new purpose. But when I try to latch onto the thought, it vanishes. One day, it will vanish forever. We've been trying for ten years now.

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When I returned from the loo in the middle of the night last night – you know how dark it is in our bedroom on cloudy nights with no moon – well, I came back in feeling my way, and as I passed the end of the bed, I had a notion of there being someone under the covers on your side. I couldn't see this of

course; I couldn't see anything, but my knee knocked the ottoman, and I had the impression of the room, as though by echo-sounder, or shadow-sounder perhaps – the scale of blackness, the expanse of quilt, and a definite presence there, not of someone skulking, waiting for my return – there was no mental presence, or at least not one that was awake. No, the visitor in the bed was stone-like and not to be disturbed by my getting back in, and sure enough, this person, whom I felt closely now I was lying beside them – their deep black inches from my nose – didn't stir at all, but held onto their sleep, and only gave themselves away by the cold radiating from that side of the mattress, and I knew then it was one of them – one of the drowned sailors from Whaligoe.

The day you're due back I start to bleed. It's the usual thing – I go to the loo and it's there on the paper when I wipe.

The dog and I watch from the window as your car pulls into the drive and you get out. I will you to keep walking, right up to the front door, and not to turn to look at the silent tree – the full bird feeders and empty branches.

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As I'm turning away for the corkscrew, you take hold of my arm. We haven't touched for such a long time, and although it's only one small area, your thumb and fingers round my wrist, we may as well be naked, our bodies pressed together, because everything melts – the sink, the window, the tiled floor.

'What's the weather been like?' you say.

'So-so,' I say. 'A bit of rain.'