

To Whom It May Concern

'There's nothing worse than too late' – Charles Bukowski

You don't know me but, I'm your father. Is that the way I should start this letter? I have no idea. I've thought about this over and over and I just don't know but, I hope you will read on and let me explain, as best I can.

Now I suppose I should outline a precis of my life so far but, that hardly seems the way to keep you rivetted to the page; a tedious curriculum vitae of someone you've never met, and almost certainly never even knew existed until a few sentences ago. Someone who is writing this so many years in the past and reaching out to you through time like some time capsule you've dug up in the garden years from now. This may be the first of several letters, but again I don't know. I don't know so many things, but I feel compelled to tell you this. Afterall, it is your story as much as it is mine. Probably, more so. Why am I writing this now? So late at night while my wife and child are sleeping? All I know is I saw something today, that made me think that what I've been doing, had to be written down, in a way confessed, before it's too late.

I was late. The donation had taken longer than usual this time, and I didn't want to arouse suspicion. My cover story of a work project that kept me late a day a week was quite secure, so far. So, my heart sank when I saw the line of cars stretching into the distance. The spreading rash of brake lights, and the gradual slowing to a crawl. An ambulance, sirens blaring and blue lights flashing racing past along the hard shoulder. Then it was dead slow. Then stop.

It was a clear summers evening, there'd been not a cloud in the sky all day. The kind of weather that gives you hope, takes you out of yourself. Makes you feel that anything is possible, that everything is going to be okay.

Stopped in the traffic waiting, I watched the cars zoom past on the opposite carriageway, the road along which I had followed my new-born daughter's ambulance on her birth day. I remember speeding, playing catch up to find her ambulance that had left before me, and finding one. Of course, I wasn't sure it was hers. It was headed in the right direction, and its speed never rose above forty miles an hour so, I assumed I'd found it. I'd been told there would be no siren and that it wouldn't be speeding. Just in case. I guess brain injury in such a tiny baby is vulnerable to any trauma, so gently does it. It felt so important to me to be there; I found such strange comfort in just being there, following. It had been a lovely day then too, but it was that day when I realised, perhaps for the first time in my life, that anything wasn't possible and, that everything wasn't going to be okay.

A blast from a horn brought me back to the present and the traffic started to move and after a short while, I passed the wreckage. Twisted metal, broken glass, a bonnet sprung open like a gapping mouth voicing a silent scream. The new registration number shattered, it was shocking to see that shiny new thing twisted, contorted, battered, ruined. Children in the car in front craned their heads, looking for horror. The windscreen was shattered, and the steering wheel was horrifically bent and twisted, and I wondered what terrible damage it must have done to the driver. I guess the airbag had failed. Is that an accident or criminal negligence? To me that somehow seems prescient, in the circumstances. And then I was past it, the scene retreating further and further behind me. I tried to see more in my side mirror, but I couldn't, and the more I tried the more I felt this strange fascination within me. I felt ashamed and guilty. Almost immediately the traffic in front sped up and I had to accelerate too, or I'd become the cause of the tailback behind. And I wondered, was it

the funnelling of the cars into one lane that had slowed us down, or was it our morbid fascination with the tragedy that had slowed us to a crawl?

I haven't stopped thinking about that contorted steering wheel and how, someone's life may be over in a few split seconds. How it may be too late for them to quit that job they hated to pursue a dream, tell someone they love them, forgive someone. To tell someone why. Dreams dashed in an instant. Like that day five years ago, the day I followed that ambulance. That's why I started this, before it was too late, there's nothing sadder than too late.

You see, we'd talked about another child and I'd said that I couldn't go through that again. The wait, the anticipation, the crushing disappointment, the sorrow like an endless mourning. She'd said lightning didn't strike the same place twice, but when I'd said that I didn't want another child thinking that we'd had them just to look after Katy, later when we couldn't; that seemed to close the matter. An ovarian cyst put paid to the idea a couple of years later anyway. It was now too late for us, for her. But it wasn't too late for me. For you.

You could ask if this is some twisted revenge on my wife? I've never apportioned blame, but she must have known something was wrong, it wasn't all the doctor's fault. She was a midwife for God's sake! I just want a second chance. Can you understand that? A second chance to have someone follow on from me. Someone that's part of me, someone who is whole and okay. I guess too, the truth is partly that after what happened I wanted a child but not the responsibility. I didn't want to let someone else down. At least that's the fantasy. Is that such a terrible thing? I suppose you could say this is all about me, and until now I never gave you a second thought. Is that fair? That perhaps it wasn't too late? For me. Damn it, why shouldn't it be? When I read this back, I'll probably sound like a deranged idiot, and maybe that's right. An egotist. But really, I'm not. I hope I'm not. I hope you've the best of me – and none of the worst.

I've already sat late at night and wondered where you are. If you are at all yet? Could you be growing inside your mother right this very second, as I write? Your tiny heart beating in tandem with your hers? How often in the coming years will I wonder where you are? Are you sitting beside me on a plane? Are you the pilot? The dentist that fills my cavities, the carer that cleans my wrinkled old body and patiently feeds me mush? The undertaker that flushes my insides out and preps me for the grave? I suppose the not knowing is my torture, my punishment for what I've done, no sin goes unpunished.

You'll be at least eighteen, if and when you read this and I'll be old, indeed if I'm here at all. So, I thought I'd write this and leave it for you, if you try to get in touch. I don't know where I'll leave it, I haven't thought that out yet, but I will. This is my confession. I hope you can forgive me. If I need forgiveness for what I've done.

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