



BRIGHT BURNING THINGS

LISA HARDING



B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y



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There she is, lethal and irresistible, my high-kicking sidekick, and there goes that minx of a song, ‘Impossibly Beautiful’, and there is the sky so high and the light so bright and the sand warm velvet beneath the soles of my bare feet, and here comes the rush, an intense feeling of connection with all that is right and good in this world: my son’s sticky hand in mine as he stares at the sky, my dog trotting alongside, his black coat glinting in the sunlight.

‘Don’t look directly at the sun, sweetheart, it burns your eyes.’

‘But Yaya, you do it too.’

I bend to kiss him on the forehead, over and over as he laughs and pretend-wrestles me away. We look like everyone else as we skip down Sandymount Strand, dogs and kids, a mark of normality. No man, but then that’s not unusual these days. Tommy breaks free and he careens



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like a drunk – no, that won't do, push that one away – runs unsteadily towards the surf, the frothy tongues of water that lick the sand. 'Go, Herbie, go – mind Tommy!' The dog bounds after him and the two of them frolic at the water's edge and I feel wave after wave of delicious things, my body vibrating with them, fingertips electric, heat pulsing its way through me.

The fever builds and I find I'm stepping out of my trousers and pulling my T-shirt over my head, dropping them in a puddle at my feet before I sprint towards my boys. My imp is waving, beckoning me into the shimmering water. *Hello, Elation, you spangly bitch.* I'm in my bra and knickers, but that's ok because it's hot and others are in their swimsuits and my underwear could pass for a bikini, so this is fine this is fine this is fine. Herbie is barking wildly. He'd have been put down in a week's time, they said, if I hadn't taken him then. Who rescued who? – the thought rises as I am submerged, the cold a tingle, adding to all the other tingles of the day, and my head is under and it's silky salty down here.

My body feels strong as I push through the surge of water, the sunlight refracted like so many tiny stars, until my lungs are burning, and my heart is thrumming in my throat. I turn on my back and float, staring directly at the concentration of light. When I close my eyes a carnival of colours and shapes explodes behind my lids. Oh, Mr Sunshine's working his magic alright! I crane my neck to see my boys, but there's a stranger, bending down to





talk to Tommy. A distorted version of the happy song of moments before burrows and grooves. Now the stranger is picking him up. Not ok. Strike at the sea with sharp, staccato strokes, fluid sloshing in my ears and mouth. As soon as my feet hit the shallows I sprint, pushing the body of water away as if it were mere air.

‘It’s ok, it’s ok, sweetheart, I’m here now, I’m here,’ I say, or I think I say, my voice warped and bouncing in my ears as I open my arms to gather him up.

‘You really shouldn’t leave a little one alone like that,’ the stranger says, an old woman who’s cradling Tommy too close. ‘Here,’ and she reaches into her bag to hand me a towel. ‘Where are your clothes?’

I don’t like the aura of authority about this woman who still hasn’t let go of my son. Start to shake with anger and cold, purple patches breaking out on my arms and legs.

‘It’s ok, Herbie,’ I say as I pat the dog on the head.

‘Oh, that poor creature belongs to you? I thought it was a stray.’

The woman’s voice sounds like a swarm of something biting and black, with wings. Static builds up inside my head, so I have to shake it.

‘Are you alright, dear?’ falls out of the woman’s mouth, and it stings.

‘Jesus, I’m fine, perfectly fucking fine. Now just give me back my boy and we’ll be out of your way.’

The woman’s grip on Tommy tightens. ‘Perhaps you should dry yourself off first?’

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Shaking with something else now and it's rocking me deep inside. My voice is huge and swallowed and I'm scared of what might happen if I release it. Breathe: in, out, in, out.

The woman sucks in her cheeks, biting down on them, making her appear cadaverous, as if she might spirit Tommy away to another dimension. 'Is there someone I can call?' Her voice a hag's voice. I knock the phone out of her hand and grab my son from her arms, which are stick-thin with loose swathes of skin. Feel repulsed by this old woman: her proximity, her bossy intrusion into our happy, happy world.

The woman calmly bends to pick up her phone, which makes my reaction seem all the more extreme. Even when I can see myself like this, from the outside, I still can't stop the tornado whipping up through me: a 'child thief', a 'kiddy twiddler', a 'dirty old bag', 'witch/bitch/crone/cunt' rip out of me as I run, a bawling Tommy clasped tight to my sopping bra, Herbie in step. Sprint to the car without stopping to pick my clothes up off the sand, people are staring – let them stare, they have nothing better to do. I throw Tommy in the back with Herbie – whose hair on his back is standing up, hyena-like – before I turn the key, which I left on the front right-hand tyre (a trick Howard taught me as I was forever losing my keys – good for something, the prick). Rev the engine and move away from the packed car park onto the congested road, my bare feet slipping on the pedals.



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I put the heater on full, willing my old banger on, humming one of Tommy's favourite tunes: *Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb...* Usually when I hum he sings, his cartoon-angel-like voice high and pure, but this time he just sticks his thumb in his mouth and sucks on it hard, as if worrying it might make the other thoughts go away. 'Ok, little man?' I say in the rear-view mirror and smile, giving him the thumbs up. Nothing. Try again: 'Ok, big man?' I stick my tongue out, roll it so the two sides touch off each other, which would normally make him chuckle, then roar with laughter, but he just squeezes his eyes shut and sucks more intently. 'Ok, Mister Man, we'll be home soon, and we can have some fishy fingers and jumping beans, ok?' I turn on the radio and Ravel's *Bolero* blasts from the speakers.

As the car heats, fog forms on the windows. I draw a heart on the windscreen, keeping one hand on the steering wheel, and write 'Mummy loves you' inside it. 'Tommy, look.' I trace the letters with my fingertip, reading aloud. He opens his eyes, squinting, leans into Herbie, tries to hug him, arms only reaching a third of the way around his wide girth. The dog moans, a happy contented sound. 'Good boy, Herbie, best boy.' His thick tail thumps on the tatty nylon seats. 'My best boys, what would I do without you?' At the next traffic light there's a man beside us who nods madly, winds his window down and shouts: 'It's not every day. Lucky day. Lucky me. Alright, darlin'?' I ignore him until the traffic lights shift to green, when I give him



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the finger as I speed off, tendrils of his voice hanging in the air: 'Yup, I'd like that alright...' My adrenalin spikes as I realise he's following me, or is he, or is that mad imp deluding me? 'Not too long now,' I say to my two boys in the back, who are still cuddled into each other. I turn to the right, checking the mirror, and see him still, but then, no, it's not him, he was just having his fun, harmless fun, it's ok it's ok it's ok. My heartbeat slows down as I think of the promise waiting for me in the fridge. I'm glad I had the foresight to do that: chill it. It's hot in the car now and it's still warm outside.

Pulling up at the row of tiny terraced red-bricked cottages, I pray that none of the snoops are lurking behind their half-slatted blinds. That Mrs O'Malley always butting in, dropping in home-made bread for 'the little mite'. I know how to make Tommy happy with his orange food: his cornflakes and marmalade and beans and fish fingers and Cheddar cheese. Meat is dead animal flesh, I had to tell him that. Not the fish, though, I don't tell him about the fish being hooked and whacked over the head. He won't eat anything remotely resembling green – something to do with mould. He's not undersized or anything, but then I don't know any other four-year-olds. I cover myself as best I can with the skimpy towel and run up the tangled path to the front door, painted a shocking pink by my own hand, splashed and botched. 'Let yourselves in,' I shout as I tear into the one bedroom we all share. I rip off my wet underwear and open the top drawer, a



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jumble of socks, bras and knickers, manage to locate a clean pair, before finding myself in the kitchen in just my pants in front of the fridge.

‘Yaya, you’ve no clothes on.’ Tommy’s voice is at the kitchen door. I hear his footsteps padding into the front room, the tip-tapping of Herbie accompanying him, then the sudden burst of noise as the TV blares. ‘Too loud,’ I shout. He doesn’t lower the volume – maybe he didn’t hear me, or maybe he’s trying to annoy me. I twist the top off the bottle and am tempted to glug from the neck, need to cool, to soothe, but force myself to open a cupboard and get a glass. A mark of staying civilised, even with no one to witness me. Particularly with no one to witness me. This delicate white deserves a glass, the space to aerate. Pour, sip daintily, then throw my neck back and drink the whole thing in one go. Instantly I relax. How tense that woman made me feel, that man in the car – *other people, fuck them* – and I pour myself a second glass. A faint burning in my stomach, a mellow warmth spreading in my chest. By the third I find I can swallow, breathe, swallow, breathe. Like swimming.

I turn the grill on to 180 degrees, open the freezer to take out the fish fingers, and find there are none. I rummage through the cupboards, locate two cans of baked beans and one opened can of dog food, a bit rank, but should be ok, Herbie eats anything. Stick the beans in the microwave and slip my frilly apron over my pants,

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an ironic moving-in gift from Tina, back when we shared a flat in London: ‘To my favourite Domestic Goddess!’ I see my old pal, grinning, off her face pretty much all the time on anything at all. The beans are hissing and spitting, jumping out of their skins. The microwave is spattered with bean juice. Later. I’ll clean that later.

‘Anything good on?’ I place the dog’s plate on the couch beside him and Tommy’s plate on his knees.

‘Where are the fishies?’

‘Don’t start, Tommy. Remember the starving children in Africa?’ The moment I say it I wish I could force the words back inside. The kind of shit my father used to spew at me. ‘There was none left. We’ll get some tomorrow, ok?’

Tommy nods and lifts a spoon to his mouth.

‘Ouchy.’

‘Too hot, darling?’ I go to his plate and blow. ‘There now, see... Yummy?’ Lift the spoon and make an airplane noise as I bring it towards his mouth, which is clamped shut. See my hand moving of its own accord, slamming the spoon against his lips and forcing them to open. The clang of metal as the spoon falls from my shaking hand onto the floor. Hyper imaginings, never a good sign. ‘Ok, not to worry, you’ll eat when you’re hungry.’ I manage a jaunty wink before finding myself back in the kitchen, the bottle to my mouth, to hell with decorum, *be still my banging heart*.

The bottle emptied, a space opens up and my head feels liberated, as if I’ve just removed a too-tight elasticated





band from my hair. Glide into the living room and flop down between my two boys, Tommy feeding Herbie the rest of his beans by hand: what a sweet, caring boy. I'll make sure he eats later. Settle against the warmth of their bodies, feel mine softening, falling.



Sometime later an acrid smell of burnt cheese on toast from yesterday fills the room. I sit up too fast, head banging, dots dancing in my eyes. Black smoke is billowing under the kitchen door. Move as if in a trance, groggy, but pulse racing – is this another of my night hallucinations? Open the grill door, reach in, grab the handle, flames are leaping, drop the pan onto the floor, *fuck, be still my walloping head*. Wrap my hand in a soggy tea towel and lift the pan into the sink. Under the tap, and whoosh, the flames burst and die, black charcoal in their place. I lined the grill with baking paper instead of tinfoil, stupid stupid stupid woman. I see my son in the doorway, eyes huge and glassy. 'Ok, Tommy, everything's alright now.'

He smiles, his mouth tight and tilted, an exact replica of his grandfather, and says, 'Beeootiful. Hot and slinky like the sun.'

Herbie whines. My hand is hot and scalded.

'Water, Yaya.' I smile at him, my little oracle, and hold my hand under the cold tap.



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Every window will need to be opened. Every part of me is jangling. Feel myself crashing, falling into the pit. Should've known when I first saw her there on the beach, shimmering, irresistible, that this was the way it would go. Grab the full bottle, turn my back, undo the screw top with my teeth. Tell myself that what Tommy doesn't see can't hurt him.

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The windows are wide open and I'm naked except for the apron, no sign of another body in the bed. The clock says 9:10 – morning already? The TV is blaring and the house stinks of burnt charcoal, overlaid with bleach, making my hot, scratchy eyes water. 'Tommy? Tommy, darling?' I lie back on the pile of tussled pillows, exhausted by the effort, and stare out the window at the grey overhang of cloud. One day of sunshine is all I deserve. My body is heavy yet my brain is racing, careening against the inside of my skull. Need to get up, shower, get dressed, go to the supermarket, make lunch, tidy the mess from the beans, scrub the charcoal off the blackened walls, buy some polish, spray the house, maybe get a bunch of flowers, tulips, brightly coloured, need to wash Tommy, clothe him, feed him, walk Herbie, find the lead – where's the lead? – must pick up after him, need to remember to do that, bring the poo bags, get my son into the fresh air,



make sure he eats. Close my eyes, drained by the effort of imagining the day's activities. Everything feels parched: tongue, gums, lips, eyes, eyelids, fingertips. Will Tommy think to bring me in water? – he should know to do that, by now.

When I wake again it's a quarter past one in the afternoon. Push myself to sitting, look at the low, lumbering clouds, full and heavy like swollen cows' udders. Nausea rises. 'Tommy?' My voice skips and scratches. 'Listen, Tommy... Mummy's got her witch's voice today!' No response and the TV is muted. Force myself to stand, the ground beneath my feet shifting – a whole-body seasickness.

The kitchen has been scrubbed, sparkling. Did I do all this last night, or this morning? When? My boys? Wait – 'Tommy? Herbie? Tommy?' Breathe, Sonya, breathe, breathe, breathe. Pull on my jeans and a warm hoodie, fight the acid reflux by swallowing manically, fight the spins by holding on to any hard surface to hand. Keys? On the hook by the door. Another gem that Howard drummed into me. Slam the door behind me, the whole house shaking, and run to the green, adrenal glands in overdrive. There are three little children and a dad, someone I don't recognise. 'Excuse me, have you seen a big black dog and a little boy?' The man looks at me like





all men ultimately look at me, like I'm a strange creature that's just crawled out from under a rock: should he stamp on me or run? This man grabs his three children and herds them away. *That's right, run away, you always do in the end.* Rain starts to gather in the heavy clouds overhead. An image of my boys, lost and scared, rises up and slams me, winding me with the force of it. Where else would they go? The beach? The shops? I run to the corner Spar. 'Have you seen a little boy and a big black dog?' The boys behind the counter shake their heads, then snigger. 'It's not funny, you assholes, a little boy is missing...' They stop laughing. 'Haven't seen him, missus.' Run onto the main road searching for a flattened black coat, insides trailing, blood oozing, all worst-case scenarios playing out. 'Herbie? Good boy, Herbie, good boy.' My voice is ripping from me. Herbie would never let anything happen to Tommy, as long as the stupid mutt hasn't stepped out into oncoming traffic. Everything else he instinctively understands, except for that one kink, where he'll see a car and barrel into its path. I run back to the park and perch on the swing, pushing it into motion with my feet, hearing Tommy's voice in my ear: 'High, higher, highest.' The movement helps offset the mounting sense of panic. Lift my face towards the sky, the lightly falling drizzle cooling my hot cheeks. How long has Tommy been missing? An hour, five? Who could I call? My father? The thought is swiped as soon as it surfaces. Howard? He'd say this was bound to happen.



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The guards? – but what kind of a backlash might come from a call like that?

My feet take off, slipping in my flip-flops on the wet tarmac as they run towards the house directly opposite ours, with its clipped hedge and planted borders, front door an innocuous brown, in keeping with the rest of the street. Why didn't I think of this in the first place? I knock politely, three times, wait, then knock again and again, louder and louder, fuck *propriety*, until the door opens a crack. 'Have you seen Tommy?' Mrs O'Malley points behind her into the kitchen, where Tommy is sitting at a table, a book in front of him, Herbie at his feet. Rage rips through me. 'Didn't you stop to fucking think I might be worried?'

Mrs O'Malley pulls the door behind her and steps outside. 'Not in front of the child. You didn't get the note, then?'

Note or no note, how dare this woman go into my house and take my boys?

'Your front door was wide open this morning. You had me worried.'

Breathe, swallow, restraint. 'Yes, I can see that.' I bring my thumbnail to my mouth and tear the quick with my teeth. Need to pull this back. 'It won't happen again, I'm sorry.' This last word visibly softens Mrs O'Malley, who opens the door wider so Tommy is fully visible, so beautiful, lost in his own world, dunking biscuits and drinking milk. 'Such great concentration.' She speaks





low and nods in his direction. Have I missed something? ‘It’s the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and he’s enamoured with Australia and the marsupials.’ Has she told him that bushfires burn them alive? And why is my son allowing himself to drink milk from another animal? Have I not told him often enough? Why have I not run to him and engulfed him in one of my hugs, squeezing the breath from him? Mrs O’Malley gestures at me to come into the living room and sit on the rustling couch, which looks like it’s still wrapped in the plastic covering it was delivered in decades ago.

‘Tommy was very hungry this morning, Sonya.’

I nod solemnly like I’m giving this some consideration. Need to present some level of respectability, and remorse.

‘I had a migraine last night.’

‘You certainly were out cold this morning.’

I blow on my scalded palm.

Mrs O’Malley gets up to plump the pillow on the single armchair, then trails her fingertip over the mantelpiece, collecting imaginary dust. The room is dimly lit, various shades of brown, stifling, redolent with an old-lady smell of TCP, stale potpourri.

‘I’m happy to mind the boy and the dog for as long as you need. I have spaghetti Bolognese for later.’

‘Tommy doesn’t eat animal flesh.’

A crease on Mrs O’Malley’s forehead actively furrows deeper, a worm making a groove in the centre of her



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already deeply lined face. Smoker's slits frame her thin mouth, which is outlined in a plum pencil, made to look bigger than it is. Powder is catching in all the ravines, her rouged cheeks giving her the appearance of one of my childhood Pierrot dolls, which used to come alive at night, dancing and whispering diabolical instructions that I could never quite remember the following morning, although a feeling of being complicit lingered. My father kept putting them back in their 'proper place' on the shelf in my bedroom after finding them stuffed in pillowcases under the bed, face down. He told me they were my friends and how could I do that to my friends?

'He told me you don't let him have milk.' Mrs O'Malley interrupts my musings.

'Cow's milk? Disgusting. What mother in her right mind...? The calves cry themselves hoarse.'

She flicks a crumb off her forearm. 'What does he eat? He's small, isn't he?'

'I'm small,' I say, my voice anything but, as it bounces off the walls, amplified.

'Yaya?' Tommy comes hurtling into the room and throws himself into my arms, Herbie a pace behind him, his whole body wriggling from the force of his big tail walloping side to side. Mrs O'Malley clears the tiny porcelain figurines within reach.

'Hey, I missed you guys. Don't ever go anywhere without telling me again.'

The old bag butts in: 'Sonya, you need help.'





A mist forms in front of my eyes. There is no anger, only a calm sense of purpose as I gather my boys and close the door behind me. I congratulate myself on not slamming it, on not losing it. My earlier use of the F-word won't be forgotten, but then nor will my neighbour creeping into my house, breaking and entering, and stealing my son, yes, stealing him from under my roof when I was sleeping.

We walk towards the car. My boys look a bit dejected, in need of an adventure.

'Who fancies walkies on the beach?'

Herbie howls and Tommy nods excitedly.

'Mr Fresh Air will blow all the cobwebs away, Tommy.'

'Clean in the head, Yaya!'

'That's the idea, Mr T!'

Need air and water, lots of water. Mouth dry and head banging. Never again.

'Tommy, you're never to go anywhere without telling me again, ok?'

'Sorry, Yaya.'

'Don't say sorry, beautiful boy. You've nothing to be sorry for. Just don't do it again.'



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