

## Children Crossing

By Alex Drynham

I pull the duvet over my head. Is it just me, my inability to cope? Our supervising social worker, Precious asked: “When will you know you’ve had enough and will you tell each other?” Seamus said we would and touched my hand. Twenty-eight days’ notice and it would all be over. I wanted to say I’ve had enough already, but that would detonate a bomb under the calm water we’re trying to present. I imagine the seismic bang, a tsunami towering over us, followed by the debris of skateboards, broken furniture, suitcases, children.

None of this seems right to me. I used to be someone who strove to make the right decisions, live life to the full, flourish. I’ve become someone I don’t want to recognise. Someone who snaps and storms out of rooms, goes silent. A suitcase of essentials, hidden under the bed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Pitch black, no thunderous aeroplanes, no grumbling pipes. A moment of bliss before my life rolls back into focus. I check the time. Four a.m. again.

We tried to have a child naturally for six years, my tubes were fine and so was his sperm count. Twice I fell pregnant but red floods flushed the dream down the loo. We used an ovulation kit, Seamus wore boxer shorts, I consumed pomegranate, olive oil and maca root. None of our methods worked. We made an appointment at the fertility clinic, a Nissan hut in the middle of a car park at the local hospital, decorated from floor to ceiling with enlarged photographs of smiling babies – fine if you are about to give birth, not if you're about to discover you're infertile. The nurse suggested IVF. Three chances on the NHS before I turned 40. That didn't work either, a doctor finally suggesting it might be my thyroid.

We moved on, enjoyed our holidays, sometimes thanked God we didn't have children, until one Christmas Eve, presents finally wrapped, I stared at the tree, silver baubles reflecting the multi-coloured lights. The fire crackling, the smell of pine cones gathered on the mantelpiece. I'd secretly done some research and knew there was a dearth of foster carers, especially anyone who would look after older siblings. I kept seeing an advert on the back of buses, "Do you have space in your home and heart?" We'd just decorated one of our spare rooms – the biggest one at the front of the house. While I was rolling the walls with some fancy variation on magnolia, I imagined two girls enjoying the

space. I liked the idea of giving children a better life, having an instant family. I'd worked for various charities but always felt one step removed from the front line. This would be a way of making a difference, being in control rather than at the whim of managers. I didn't know if Seamus would be keen. We'd talked about adoption as an option but dismissed it, often a long wait and not sure if we would be approved at our combined age of 87.

\*\*\*\*\*

Seamus brings me a glass of Prosecco. His body enveloped in a brushed cotton navy dressing gown. We sink into the hand-made cream, feather sofa that we bought instead of renewing our gym membership. I don't know whether to broach it tonight. The urge feels strong inside me. I don't know if I can go through the Christmas charade without talking about it. If he says no, I'll feel even more miserable, more trapped, unfulfilled. I can't imagine carrying on as we are, work, eat, sleep, holidays for the next twenty years until we retire.

"Happy Christmas Eve," he smiles, kisses me.

We chink glasses. He stretches his legs along the length of the sofa, entwining them in mine.

“Nice to have an evening to ourselves before the onslaught of family.”

Oh shit. Not a good start. He’s referring to the annual pilgrimage to spend two days with his family in Hertfordshire. For years he’s thought it might be his mum’s last. She is nearly ninety now, preserved in Sherry.

“Actually, there’s something I want to talk to you about.” I didn’t mean to sound ominous.

“Jesus, what is it?”

“Oh nothing, well, no, not nothing, a good thing, hopefully.” What an idiot, why can’t I just say it.

He puts his glass down and sits up straighter. “Are you OK?”

“I’m thinking, I was wondering, I’d like to explore,” I hesitate, this is it, I have to say it, “the idea of fostering.”

He downs his drink.

“Fostering?” He gives me a look as if he’s trying to see what’s going on behind my eyes.

I plough on. “I’ve been doing some research, there’s a dire shortage of foster carers and too many adopters.” My voice squeaky. “They need people to look after older children long-term.”

He frowns. “As in?”

“Like having a family, only they’re ready-made.” Probably too flippant. Seamus doesn’t laugh. Perhaps we should have tried harder, paid for private IVF treatment. But why make more babies when there are children who need looking after?

“Did I just hear you say they?” he asks.

I have to be honest, keep going, be enthusiastic. “I was thinking about two.” I blush.

“Two. Good God. Surely not at once.” He fills up his glass again. I just want him to say yes, at least to exploring the idea.

He pulls his legs up and grabs them with his right arm. “Jesus, how long have you been planning this? Why didn’t you say something before?”

“I’m not sure.” I bite my lip. It’s not a definite no, then. I think he’s cogitating at least.

“I thought we’d decided not to have kids now. Think about the holidays we’ve had in the last couple of years. Do you really want to swap the Galapagos Islands for Center Parcs? Just think, we can wake up whenever we want, go out at the drop of a hat, do you really want to give up all that?” He loosens his dressing gown, so I can see more of his chest. I feel a twinge.

He's right, we wouldn't be able to make love in the living room or go on the same kind of holidays. Sometimes, flying business class, if he could wangle a PR article.

Perhaps I should appeal to his sense of adventure. "I'd like to see places through the eyes of a child. Just think of the holidays we could give them, expand their horizons, show them the world."

"Bake cookies," a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

I sigh. I would like to bake with them but perhaps he's right, I'm too romantic. I guess I've been thinking about it for much longer. I just want him to say yes.

He gets up to stoke the fire, puts his hand on the black mantelpiece. The painting we first bought together hangs above, a bold seascape. "I'm worried about feeling trapped. We've got so much freedom now."

"Not really, we're tied to jobs."

"But we can give those up with a month's notice."

He says that but I know he won't. It's always me who has to make the big decisions, so far it's been moving house and getting hitched. "Can we at least go to an open evening or something, just explore the idea?"

He sits back down, rubs his eyes. “I suppose there’s no harm but as long as we’re just exploring the idea, right, no commitment?”

“Are you sure?” I lean forward and kiss him on the lips.

He moves over so we can lie together on the sofa. “As long as we keep an open mind and don’t get carried away. I think you need to find out more about what’s involved, what the kids are like, how much support you get.”

“OK, I’ll do some research.”

“Let’s not tell my family tomorrow; keep schtum.”

\*\*\*\*\*

I call our local council on the first working day after Christmas.

“Press one for adoption, two for fostering.” My hands tingle. A life changing press of the button. I hope the person on the end of the phone is friendly. I wish Seamus was here, wish he was more enthusiastic. It rings twice and clicks into answerphone. I leave a message, stare at the wall. Nothingness. Make a cup of tea. Stare at the phone. Nobody calls back.

I google fostering agencies and fill in a form on a private fostering agency recruitment portal. The home page boasts: “It’s an agency jungle

out there.” Minutes after pressing ‘submit’, I receive a phone call from an agency manager. It sounds like she’s at her kitchen table, a dog yaps, a baby gurns, a kettle boils.

“We have a lot of teenage mums and babies who need looking after,” she gabbles.

“That’s not what I put on my form,” I say, a bit confused.

“Well, if you could have a think about it. It’s a good rate of pay.”

“Thanks, I’ll think about it.”

I put down the phone and it rings immediately. Another agency. Larger this time. In fact, I imagine from her voice that the woman is large, friendly, ex-nurse. “Tell me what your ideal is, let’s see what we can do for you.”

I explain that we want to have a family and could look after two school-aged children. She asks about our ethnicity.

“White British and Irish.”

“Wonderful. White carers in London are like gold dust. We’d love to have you on our books.”

Is this blatant discrimination or stating a reality? I feel uncomfortable.

“Why is there a shortage of white carers?” I ask tentatively.



“We get more white carers coming forward for adoption, they don’t seem so interested in fostering.”

I only know one white person who has fostered but several who have adopted. Is it cultural? Black families more willing to look after other people’s children. A history of children from Africa and the Caribbean being sent to England to be looked after by relatives, ostensibly to give them a better life.

“Can you tell me the difference between going with you or the local council?”

“You won’t get much support from them. They’ll promise it but you’re much better going with an agency, the bigger the better and we’re one of the biggest in the country.”

The support sounded appealing but I didn’t feel comfortable with the privatisation of fostering. Seamus would be dead against it. Life-long Labour supporter. I’d emerged from a cocoon of Conservatism as a child via the Lib Dems as a teenager to voting Labour most of my adult life.

“Right.”

“I could come and see you tomorrow if you like,” she says.

“I can’t do tomorrow,” I lie.

“You say when it suits you then.”

“I’ll check with my partner and call you back.”

“You know you get paid more by a private agency.”

Another agency rang an hour later and another one in the afternoon. I shouldn’t have entered my details. I could have sold myself to the highest bidder. I gave the local council another chance and left a message. Two days later someone called back and suggested coming to an open evening in three weeks’ time.

\*\*\*\*\*

We park by the hospital on a bitingly cold evening. Two boys smoking weed in the doorway of a block of flats, hoods up. Bags of rubbish piled up around the municipal green bin. An ambulance wails past. A few daffodils in a tiny community garden struggle in the wind. My cheekbones ache.

There’s a handwritten sign on the door to the doctor’s surgery, telling people to go to the back of the building, as the entry phone isn’t working. We go down a narrow, ill-lit passage and find another sign flapping in the wind, telling us to climb the fire escape to the third floor.

I stumble on an uneven piece of flooring surrounding the base of the metal stairs. My nose prickles. Streaks of acrid urine decorate the wall. I hold on to the cold railing. We follow more paper signs along a corridor and finally reach the room. Fifteen grey plastic chairs in an arc. Three women at the front, two black, one white, fussing around a TV on wheels. The glaring strip lighting shows up the dirty, chipped white walls, yellow blinds pulled down to the floor, grey tiles, tall ceiling.

“Please come in, write your name on a label and help yourselves to refreshments,” says ‘Delores’, according to her sticky label. She pulls her long black cardigan over her dark purple blouse and flowing black trousers, patent black shoes poking out. I feel a bit scruffy in jeans, black polo neck and duffel coat. Seamus didn’t have time to change, so he’s in a smart, dark grey woollen coat, blue business suit, white shirt.

We help ourselves to some Budget orange juice and broken biscuits in a family selection box. The bourbons all gone. The carton slurps its contents over my hand. I lick off the stickiness. We sit next to each other in the two chairs nearest the door.

‘Sarah’ wearing a Christmas jumper, with Santa’s nose in relief, hands us both a leaflet entitled: “Do you have space in your heart and your home?” Pink-rimmed glasses, too big for her face, perhaps she’s trying to look child-friendly. “We’ll wait a few mins, see if anyone else shows

up,” she says. She puts the other leaflets down on a low table by the TV and picks up a clipboard.

“Can I just ask how many bedrooms you have?” Strange first question.

“Four,” I say hesitantly.

Sarah’s tongue runs along the edge of her teeth. “And you live locally?”

“Ten minutes from here, in good traffic,” says Seamus.

“No other children?”

“None,” I say. My voice catching slightly.

“And can I just ask, are you a couple?”

“Yes,” says Seamus, touching my knee.

“Right. Would you mind writing your names on these sticky labels.”

The clock ticks. Delores looks along the corridor but returns empty-handed. “We’ll leave the door open for any latecomers.”

I wonder how she walks on her stilettos. Her hair is severely straightened and tinged brown at the ends. Why am I even noticing these things? I wonder if they are judging us already.

“We’ll make a start then. I’m Delores, a senior assessing social worker. I always admire people like you who come out on cold nights like this and are willing to open up their lives to society’s most vulnerable children.”

As if the weather should put you off. I shuffle backwards in my chair and put my coat over my knees.

“My colleague, Sarah, is a children’s social worker who matches young people with foster carers, if you get through the approval process.”

I’m anxious about getting through the evening.

“Laquita, here, is a foster carer, so she can tell you how rewarding it is.”

Laquita’s orange lipstick has smudged on to one of her teeth. She’s wearing a blouse with frilly sleeves, her hair a tumble of black ringlets, possibly a wig. Eyes slightly manic.

“We’ll explain a bit about our roles and the support you can expect from us and then you can ask questions,” says Delores.

Sometimes, if I feel trapped in a room, I have an urge to pee. I don’t want to bolt now. I’d look weird. Mind over matter, deep breathing.

Focus. Feet firmly on the ground. It’ll be alright.

“If you decide to apply, we’ll visit you to do an initial interview and look around your home, see if it’s suitable,” says Delores.

“Your house will never be so tidy.” Laquita laughs. Delores doesn’t. “We need to make sure it meets our health and safety standards and is suitable for children.”

“If we’re satisfied at this stage you fill in an application form,” says Delores turning the page on her notes. “We also need contact details of previous sexual partners.”

That’s an ambiguous phrase, surely they mean serious relationships. I’m still in touch with two, who lasted more than a year and could track down a couple of others.

“You might find this a bit intrusive,” says Sarah, red blotches forming on her neck.

Slightly, I gulp. Little did I know they would later present me with a “couple’s questionnaire”, asking whether we’re monogamous, if we keep adult material in a safe place and if we are sexually satisfied. Not too intrusive then.

“We have to place children with responsible adults. We can’t take any risks.” I do get that. “We check council records in all the local authorities where you’ve lived,” adds Delores.

\*\*\*\*\*

I walk around the house, trying to think of it from a social worker's point of view. I want to make sure she doesn't have any reason to reject us. I lug the wine down to the cellar. At least we'll get fit going up and down the stairs every time we need a bottle. I take down the life drawings from the living room and hang them in our bedroom. It looks like a tart's boudoir. I move the Modigliani back into the living room. Surely, one is acceptable.

The living room isn't very child-friendly, we'll have to sell the cream sofa or buy a large throw. The glass ornaments will have to go. I dig out a Rubik's cube and a set of dominoes from the bottom of the pine chest and put them on the coffee table. Too fake? I put the heating on full blast.

Sarah turns up ten minutes late without apologising. She has treated her roots, an orange-rust colour, clashing with the pink glasses. I take her purple waterproof and hang it over a radiator.

"Lovely street."

"Thank you."

"Most of our carers live on estates. Not that there's nothing wrong with that."

“No.” I smile, apart from your grammar. I must stop caring. The kids will probably drop their Gs and Ts.

Sarah takes up the offer of tea and bustles into the kitchen, sits down before being asked and gets out her folder.

I forgot to remove the suggestive fridge magnets – stupid presents from friends. Too late. I open the door quickly. A wine bottle and four cans of beer on full display. I grab the milk and shut the door. Should I leave the milk out or would that look worse? I hastily return it. Sarah seems absorbed by her phone.

I put out a plate of oatmeal ginger biscuits tipped with dark chocolate. An ancient belief in my family that quality biscuits curry favour. Sarah helps herself to two.

“Right, let’s get through this list. Don’t worry, this one’s only three pages.”

She marks down the number of bedrooms, bathrooms, separate loos, reception rooms. The age of the boiler, three years and two months. Perhaps she’s moonlighting as an estate agent.

She turns the page and reads like an automaton: “Any guns held at the property, for instance those for which a licence is required?”



“No.” I laugh but Sarah doesn’t. This is inner city London.

“Is alcohol kept out of reach?”

“Yes.” I’m lying already. What kind of parent am I going to be?

“Cigarettes and lighters out of reach.”

“We don’t smoke.” I notice the scented candles and matches on the dresser. Would the Patchouli have a calming influence on the children?

“Do you have any pets?”

“No.”

“That saves the pet questionnaire then.”

I think she’s joking but she puts a separate sheet back in her folder.

“Do you have parental controls on computers?”

“Not yet.” I don’t even know what they are. I imagine my mother sitting on top of my computer, saying time for a screen break, darling.

“I’ll tick yes for that then. You soon will.”

“Is electrical equipment in good repair?”

“Yes.” I haven’t a clue.

“Are there any indoor plants which are poisonous and would prove a danger to children?”

I look at the rubber plant we’ve had for years, looks harmless enough. “I don’t think so.” I didn’t realise indoor plants could pose a danger.

She ticks no.

The questions go on and on. When are we going to talk about the children, for Christ’s sake?

“Is your furniture safe?”

“I haven’t been attacked by any recently.”

She sighs.

“Do soft furnishings conform to British Standards?”

“I think so.”

“Well, I’ll have to check the labels as we go around.”

My God. This is going to take forever.

“Are all large areas of glass fitted with safety glass?”

There's a crack in a pane of the French windows, perhaps she won't spot it. A friend fell against it at a party last summer. It didn't smash but I have no idea if that means it's safety glass.

"Well, not the stained glass."

"But the rest." I shrug. She glances around, missing the cracked pane and ticks yes.

"Are there any cords, for instance, attached to window blinds or dressing gowns which can prove hazardous to children?"

"Our dressing gowns have cords and there's a blind in my office." I wonder how you secure your dressing gown without a cord.

"I'll take a look when we go up."

"Are there any weapons kept at the property, including ornaments or others used for sporting activities?"

Seamus has a spear from some press trip to Kenya but I'm not going to let that stop us from fostering. It's somewhere in the eaves, she'll never see it.

"We've got tennis rackets, cricket bats, a lacrosse stick." She's bound to see them in the newly named play room.

“That’s fine, it’s good you’re sporty. To be honest, anything could be used as a weapon.”

I gulp.

“Are knives and other utensils kept out of reach?”

“They’re in pots on the counter and knives in drawers.”

“Well, it depends on the kids. I’ll say yes for now but it might be something to think about.”

“Have you got a first aid box in the house and the car?”

“No, I’ve got some plasters and Dettol.”

“Well, just make sure you get them before the kids move in.”

I notice she doesn’t use the conditional tense.

She turns another page. “Is there a swimming pool or hot tub?”

We’re looking out over the postage stamp garden. Does she think we’ve got one suspended in mid-air?

“No.” I try not to sound impatient.

“Fine, let’s look around the house. I’ll fill in some more details from my observations as we go around. Seems warm enough and the lightings OK.” It’s broad daylight.

I politely show her around, hoping, at least for some compliments on the decor. Sarah follows me with her clipboard, noting things down, checking window locks, touching radiators.

I muse on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Perhaps shelter is the first thing the social workers think about, followed by food and eventually whether you could provide love, stimulation and support to realise children’s potential, allowing them to self-actualise. Sarah seems more interested in where we keep the toilet cleaner. “That’ll have to be locked up.” Next on her list are the two rooms we could make available for the children. I gush about how we would decorate them. She says it’s better to paint them white and let the kids decide. She ticks another box. We go back down to the kitchen.

“We’d need to sort out a few things such as a fire blanket and a locked cabinet but generally I think this would be a lovely home,” says Sarah.

“And I can tell you, I’ve seen some horrors.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Well, the next step is for us to start the home study sessions and fill in this form.” Sarah hands me a wodge of paperwork and gets out her phone. She doesn’t handle it confidently.

\*\*\*\*\*

The house has passed the test, today it’s the start of my turn; me as a person, my history, my ability to parent.

Sarah bustles in with her laptop case and a woven handbag.

“Bugger of a journey, how you doing?”

“Fine thanks, how are you? Tea?”

“Could kill one, bless you, black, two sugars.”

She takes off her boots while I hang her brown duffel coat on the newel post; the back of it speckled with grey dog hairs. I guide her into the living room. Slight whiff of wet dog and cigarette smoke.

“Make yourself at home.”

She’s wearing bootleg purple corduroy trousers and a rainbow sweater. I hope I look mumsy enough in my cream Arran jumper and jeans.

While the kettle's boiling, I fan out some chocolate digestives on a side plate. Should the biscuits be healthier? Would the children's teeth rot in such a household?

Sarah has settled herself on the cream sofa with two cushions to support her back. I sit at a right angle to her on the old sofa; it's firmer and makes me feel a bit more in control. Sarah helps herself to three sugars and a biscuit, has a slurp and opens her laptop.

"Right. Let's start at the very beginning, work through your childhood from zero. We want to know how you were brought up. Influences. Any major incidents, how they might impact on your ability to parent. Kids are great at pressing buttons, so we try to find them first, make sure you've dealt with them before you're triggered. I'll type while you speak to fill in the form F." Sarah adjusts her glasses and scrolls down her screen.

I drag some air through my nose slowly and exhale, pushing down my diaphragm. I feel like I'm standing naked on top of a hill, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. I baulk at job interviews; this is a hundred times more invasive; and only the first of eight to ascertain if I'm a decent human being, capable of looking after damaged children.

Sarah enters her password. Her laptop pings. "So, tell me about your birth."

“My birth? Well, I was there but I don’t remember it.”

Sarah adjusts herself on the sofa. “What were the circumstances?

Parents together? Home birth? Any risk of damage in uteri?”

“I was untimely ripped from my mother’s womb,” I say, quite pleased with my little joke.

She looks alarmed. “You what?”

Shit, she doesn’t get it. “Emergency caesarean. Twenty-two hours of labour. My head was too big.”

“Right.”

Her hands hover over her keyboard, she’s not quite sure of me already. I’m such an idiot.

“Can you tell me about your parents’ situation at the time?” she asks gingerly.

“I was my parents’ first child. They were in their twenties, had just moved out of London to a starter home on a new development in the suburbs. There were about forty terraced houses set around a landscaped green where kids could play. It was on the edge of a tributary of the Thames. They said the estate was like a university campus for new parents.”



Hopefully, this is all sounding normal enough. In fact, the house was flooded when I was about two, traumatic for my mother, who was on her own with me, but I don't consciously remember that either.

Sarah types away. A stable, loving start. I wonder about the children's start in life, unplanned, abandoned.

"Were you born into a religious family?"

"I was christened but it was just for form's sake. We used the Church of England for hatches, matches and dispatches."

She looks slightly disapproving. Am I betraying my Marxist leanings on this topic? I think of the poet, Jackie Kay's adoptive mum hiding *The Daily Worker* under the sofa and Marx in the airing cupboard.

"Can I just ask, have you found out any more about the children you mentioned at the open evening?"

She sucks in her teeth: "I shouldn't really, not til you're approved and that won't be for at least another six months." She looks around the room as if it might be bugged. "Listen, don't tell anyone I told you, right."