

Qualias

the sense of things

**JOELLE
TAYLOR**

We are a nation afraid of our own children.

BRAND 43

This is a true story.

Mrs Meeks had known for some time that there was something about her son Richard. Something small and quiet. Cautious. Cornered. Perhaps it was that he had been adopted from a war-bored, indeterminate and ugly Eastern European spit and channel-switch of a city. Perhaps it was that he had already been grown/ a teenager indeed/ when adopted, and so had memories of things that he could not remember. Or perhaps it was the language barrier. He had mislaid his mother tongue/ and stone-washed his genes.

When Mrs Meek discovered/ quite by accident one dull and dim Wednesday afternoon after a treachery of daytime television talk shows/ that 15 year old Richard aka Milosevic was in fact a 35 year old shaven headed woman from Croydon/ all things began to slip into place.

A strange and harrowed man/ face as ploughed as pockets/ occupied the screen and held up a poorly taken Polaroid of his wife. The wife that was in fact Richard. And the man himself seemed somehow faintly familiar. An overheard conversation.

Mrs Meeks sipped her tea. Edged toward the screen. Peered. Sipped her tea again.

Oh, she murmured. Oh. The sound of small birds escaping/ flitting through the bars of her gilded teeth. Of ideas originating.

But later when she thought about it/ whilst massaging meat for supper/ it did make perfect sense.

Over the five years of his settling with them Richard had exhibited an unnering willingness to listen. He rarely talked about himself. He washed up without being asked. He never dated. Sometimes/ she caught him regarding her over the dinner table with unsettling sympathy. He had begun to roll his eyes when her husband had one of his ideas. He abhorred violence/ and preferred romantic comedies to action thrillers. He. Read. He did not mix comfortably with other teenage boys. And worse of all/ he did well in school.

But this is not the story. The story is what Mrs Meeks did next.

Nothing. She ignored the fact that a 35 year old South London woman had transgressed the pseudo-Christian confines of her be-flowered and earnestly patterned home/ and sat now ill-dressed in the perfidious attire of an urban youth. She washed and pressed the same smile/ over-cooked the same meals. She did not vary her conversation. She did not vary. She did. Not.

Mrs Meeks knew they had been invaded. And she must keep the home fires burning. Preferably/ in one of those contemporary pebble strewn floating white bowl grates. Artificial flames.

That night/ she waited until the continental shift of her husband's breathing began to reveal new land masses/ and slid silently down the stairs to the study. The Study. The Library. The Archive. The Room of Many Wonders and Frequent Expectation. The Office. It was/ of course/ simply a room with an arthritic laptop and the contemptuously stacked detritus of disaffected days. A place where things were sent to wait. She edged into the computer chair and powered the machine. As she waited/ she counted the ways:

44 BRAND

1. A couple/ sly of ovary and selfish of sperm/ decide to adopt a child from a country less-affluent and from where the child would of course therefore be grateful for eternity.
2. They adopt aforementioned child, finding him via Google.
3. They check him on *Facebook*; he seems pleasant enough. And only has one friend. It is that friend Mrs Meeks determines to find now.
4. Boy moves in. Settles in quickly to new home. Attends school. Does homework. As expected/ he does his homework badly enough to pass as a boy.
5. He insists his hair is always shaven. She thinks it's sweet. In a thuggish manly football on a Sunday kind of a way. Now/ she finds it sinister.
6. He develops attributes that worry her. His homework is done on time. His handwriting becomes legible. He listens to her. Something must be done.

She brought up the *Facebook* home page and typed her usurper son's name into the browser. There he was. A full faced shot of him taken at the time of the adoption. Such a small face. Bird wing cheeks. A generous sofa of a mouth. Paddling pool eyes. And there was his one friend, Stefan. Stefan did not have a picture but a diagram as his avatar. In fact she had no idea why she even thought Stefan was a man and not a woman. All bets were off now. She jumped to Stefan's

page. And there she found the beginning to the answer to the question she had not yet asked.

She scrolled down his profile page and read through his last status update. 'Stefan is...wondering where all the good weather went'. Hmmm. Suspicious. She moved on to his photographs. The usual. A ridiculous parade of sadling evenings spent in some sadling bar on the sadling side of town.

It was the third photograph that alarmed her. A poorly framed shot of Stefan with her Aunt Shenique. Holding on to each other like life boats. Like dinghies. Grinning. A spot of saliva on her bottom lip. That mole.

She closed the lid to the laptop. Opened it again. She was still there. Her aunt. Quickly she shuffled through the other pictures. There was no doubt; her aunt occupied the majority of them with her arms around the same man, 'Stefan'. A name of incipient evil and mal-intent.

W**hy was her aunt a friend of her son? She had not seen her ill-faced and denim blouson-twitching aunt since/ *then*. Since/ *that* time.

She switched screens and peered closer at the picture of Richard. Imagined the impossible. Found it to be/ in fact/ practical. There could be no doubt. Richard was her mother.

We are a nation afraid of our own children.

Some of our children are older than us.

Mrs Meek's son/ Richard aka Milosevic aka Charmain/ who travelled to Highgate via Croydon and Kosovo/ her son who is old enough to be her mother is/ in fact/ her mother. Because beneath her Laura Ashley print skin/ under her Habitat heart/ Mrs Meeks is a corner girl from a clogged sink/ blue bottle and bandana/ South London estate. Her true accent is chipped concrete. Her eyes are smashed CCTV cameras. Her mouth is a dark pissed-stained council flat stairway. She is somewhere you are frightened to go.

And Mrs Meeks did grow up afraid of herself. Afraid to be caught alone by herself. To hear her own footsteps stammering behind her. Her shadow waits for her.

Mrs Meeks is disgusted by herself. There is the smell of graffiti and witless conversation about her. Her skirts will always be too short/ no matter how long they are. Her make-up will always be a little too strong. A little too clumsy. Needy. She will always be a little too much of everything.

And after a while/ she became afraid of her parents too. They were not abusers in the classic sense. She was never beaten or locked in tight cupboards or made to eat scissors. But she was abused by the desolate sense of herself. Her class. The confines of her mouth. The jealously guarded postcode territories of her stupid skin. She was abused by herself. Night after night after cloying grammatically incorrect ridiculous expectation night.

She needed to escape. But could not. She was always one step behind her.

And then/ she was sixteen.

It was on the night before her birthday that that she hit on the idea of kidnapping of herself. In this way/ her parents would not feel abandoned. Simply surprised. She waited until the moon was a full stop/ then crept up behind herself. A bag. A hand. A rustle of indignation and a trill of terror. Then noth-

ing. She sat in a cold room for uncountable days and sipped water from an old rusting pipe while struggling against the ropes around her thin wrists under the mesmeric light of a bare lap dancing bulb. But it was no good. She would not let herself go.

Ransom notes were sent to her parents/ who despite anguish and thick bellies beneath their eyes/ observed that the notes were written in eyeliner. Which is uncommon for kidnappers. In addition they observed that the amount requested for her return varied from note to note/ with none going above £19.99 – which they also observed was the approximate cost of the new *Nintendo* game. The kidnappers had apparently stolen the consul along with their daughter.

Curious.

And so time tutted past. Mrs Meek forgot herself/ and met her husband of 12 years. And proceeded to forget him as well. Eventually/ she cast off her rough wrist restraints and replaced them with apron strings. She cast off her wrist restraints and/ with them/ any real memory of herself. Of. That. Corner. Girl.

But Mrs Meeks' mother knew. Mothers always know. They know before you have the thought. And Mrs Meeks' mother – Richard – was particularly omniscient. A word she could not spell.

She had watched her daughter abduct herself/ and not wanting to interrupt what appeared to be an intensely private moment or risk any bemusing familial contact/ had simply studied the event from afar. As had her sister. They shared a cigarette/ exhaled thick clouds of sadness and anger and regret/ and picked up a pen. They. Planned.

One should never disown one's parents. They know who you are. They live in your face.

46 BRAND

And so they waited and watched and huddled wet and miserable on street corners/ or in sodden confetti on the wedding day they were not invited to/ and devised a way of reaching her again. Of convincing her not only of their worth/ but of her own. And then the chance came. Her sister Shenique was going out with Stefan who used to work from the Dockyard in Tilbury on one of the merchant ships as a computer programmer. It is amazing and gratifying what someone will do for an ounce of Tibetan Monkey Weed. Stefan dutifully hacked into Mrs Meeks' system.

The decision for her to offer herself up for adoption to her daughter was a risk/ but one worth taking. She had a hunch that/ in spite of herself/ her daughter would see the resemblance and be moved to invite it into her home. She was right.

But these last years had been hard. And she had missed her husband/ who could not understand why his council flat was the target of kidnappers again. He suffered/ but was a talk show sufferer. A celebrity survivor. He searched for his wife in all the wrong places/ in the hope that he would not find her there.

Meanwhile/ his wife learned to be a man. Gender is a performative act/ like everything else. And so she wrote herself. She began to walk as though she meant it. To speak as though her words were important. To listen as though it were a gift. She touched her face for the first time in years. Stopped plucking her chin. And over time/ her voice had lowered too/ hunkered down and stuck to the shadows.

It is never too late to parent. You are never too young to be your own mother. You are never too old to be your daughter's son.

It is the small things that defeat us in the end/ the food stuck in the tooth/ the sliver of glass on the bathroom floor. Before he left for school that morning/ Richard understood that he had been caught. Something in her flickering right eye. Something in the cold warmth of her voice. He commented on her hair/ and exited stage left.

Shit. Fuck. Shit.

There is alchemy to women. A shifting of states. We are all almost something else.

All that remained was the confrontation. The moment when each caught each other between states/ during the shift/ when we are most real.

But the strangest thing/ was how much younger Richard felt. Looked. Was. Lines had fallen from her like a well-rehearsed actor. Her face had crawled back up her head/ and hung resolutely on. Eyelids lifted like theatre drapes. Greyness retreated from her hair like summer tide.

The ugly scrub of experience was exfoliated.

She had become the thing that she impersonated. She had become Himself. And had begun/ slowly and shyly at first/ to believe her daughter was her mother. More than she had ever believed she herself was one.

And had it not been perfect? The perfect tableaux of the imperfect family. Suburban baroque?

The day passed like social workers.

Mrs Meeks was a still-life waiting for the son who was her mother to return. *'Mrs Meeks with coffee cup at kitchen table' 1993/ Acrylic and stiffened spite on stretched gingham. Enquire within.*

This is the point where all stories end. The paper is flat after all/ and all stories must fall off the edge.

As he saw her/ Richard knew this was the moment. The final paragraph leading to the full stop. He let the kitchen door catch/ cleared his throat/ and took the seat opposite his starched kin/ his Brit Art of a parent. When he narrowed his eyes/ he was aware of faint smudgings around her outline. It always comes to this.

Mrs Meeks spoke first/ through cattle grid lips.

'I. Know. Who. You. Are.' Stubbing each word out on to the table top/ the fine pink gingham party cake table top/ where they had eaten and talked and lied and reviewed crosswords and cross words. The fine pink gingham table top that now looked as insincere as his clothing. Her clothing. Richard's throat caught in the same way the kitchen door had. Something to do with the weather. Always the same this time of year.

'I see.'

Mrs Meeks rose to her full shortness.

'What do you want?'

'I can't remember...'

And it was true. Richard's previous life was a watercolour in a washing machine. A photograph left out in the sun. A mislaid newspaper clipping. The shadow left by Hiroshima.

Mrs Meeks/ pale flesh and primrose print/ Mrs Meeks/ straight back and starched lip/ Mrs Meeks/ the woman who had once abandoned herself at the entrance of a badly lit council estate/ unfolded at the kitchen table. And tucked gently/ quietly/ in the softest part/ was the pearl. The bit formed from grit and spittle

and insults and washing up and short skirts in cold weather: the Who she was.

'Well; I know what you want. You are my son. And I expect what you want is your dinner.'

And she rose to make tea/ straightening the hem of her smile as she stood.

You see?

Sometimes:

A child needs our love the most/ when he deserves it the least.