

Milk and Bubbles and Innocence by Laura Kenny

The clock creeps inexorably towards five o'clock. He closes his eyes and imagines homecomings. The girls run to him on their chubby, unsteady legs. He hears their delighted high-pitched squeals of 'Daddy, Daddy!' and feels their soft, pyjama-clad weight barrel into him. He pulls them close and inhales the scent of milk and bubbles and innocence.

'You coming out with us tonight Jack?' His workmates shut down and pack up, not waiting for his answer. The Friday afternoon buzz intensifies.

He answers anyway. 'Maybe next time,' he tells his computer, scrutinising the document on the screen in an effort to avoid their poorly-disguised pity. He is the last to leave. There's no rush to return to an empty house.

It's raining. He doesn't know why he feels so surprised; it always seems to be raining these days. It rained on their wedding day, and on the day the twins were born.

Waiting at the corner for the lights to change, he hears a woman exclaim, 'For Christ's sake, it's not the end of the world.' He wants to ask her how she can be so sure, but gets carried away in a human sea when the little man beckons. He loses her.

The train is full. He stares at a smiley face drawn on the window; the rain makes it cry. The rhythmic clacking of the rails repeats, 'You don't understand, you don't understand, you don't understand.' When the train lurches around a corner he bumps into the young woman standing beside him. She reminds him of his wife, before she got so tired and skeletal, before she got so sad.

'I'm sorry,' he tells her.

On his street houses hide behind trees and fences and proper manners. Mrs Wilson lurks behind her living room curtain. When he lifts his hand in greeting the curtain twitches back into place. He wonders what she sees when she looks out her window.

He hesitates before turning the key in the lock. He forgets to breathe, then remembers.

When he opens the door he is met by silence.

He scans for clues, maybe a note, but finds none. 'Hello!' he calls out. 'Shelley?'

'In the kitchen.' She sounds cheerful.

He tosses his keys onto the hall table and loosens his tie.

The kitchen is redolent with the aroma of onion, garlic and herbs. The table is set for two with their best china. He thinks the pattern is called Caroline or Clementine, a girl's name at any rate. It was a wedding present from her parents. They rarely use it. He worries that maybe he has forgotten an important date, like their anniversary.

'Where are the kids?' He hopes they aren't already in bed.

He reaches into the cupboard for a glass.

'They're in the bath.' She has her back to him, stirring a pot. Her hair looks freshly-washed and she is wearing clean clothes. He stares at her, uncomprehending. The glass hits the tile floor, breaking into sharp, jagged pieces.

He stops in the doorway of the bathroom.

The girls float with limbs entwined, much like he imagines they had in the womb, only motionless. He wishes he could turn back the clock. 'Here, feel them move,' Shelley would say, placing his hand on the mound of her stomach. Somehow, this time he would keep them safe.

He scoops them out of the cold water and pulls them into a tight embrace. He inhales the scent of milk and bubbles and innocence.