

Breaking News

by Alison Wells

I heard it on the radio about the tsunami. About the rush of water about the push and swell of it up through the narrow streets about the people swept up about the children and the friends and relations. I saw in my head the faces with stock fear, the running, the flailing. I saw a bicycle leaning, still, at the side of a building, a plain bicycle, dull silver. I saw flood debris bobbing on the surface of the water, logs, livelihoods, dark heads of hair. I went back and saw the tranquil beach basking in sun, heard the high shouts of compact children, the whish of waves, the grit and sift of sand.

On the news they said that there was a baby born in a stable. There are rumours that he may be the son of God but initial reports are unconfirmed.

A baby was found in a skip in Walkinstown. The baby is alive. It was in a holdall but the zip was half open. It might have been the kind of holdall I bring to the gym. The grim gym. I go there in the morning before work. I go on the treadmill, I run very far to nowhere. The guy beside me does the weights, he piles them up one after another. He strains against his strains, against his bad marriage, his immutable work, his inscrutable boss. We each do our thing behind framed windows, like energetic shop mannekins or freak show exhibits: distended, contorted, upended, thwarted.

I had a girlfriend once. Her name was Katy. She said 'Mark, I have some news' she put her hand on her tummy and pressed. I couldn't handle the news. Unintended embryo gives Dad to be gut punch. When she lost it I thought it was for the best. Things wouldn't have been the same. Anti-Matter. Anti-News. Now it doesn't matter. We broke up. 7 out of 10 relationships fail on account of the kid question.

What did Katy do next? A year later I met her in the street and she had more news. She showed me her hand, her ring finger. She flapped it up and down like a fishing rod. I didn't take the bait. In other news the cost of living is coming down. Jewellers are slashing

their prices. The diamond looked large and jaunty. It was the kind of ring she said she'd never want when we looked in ring shops pretending looking didn't mean anything.

I heard a sixteen year old became a millionaire out of his garage. I heard the first Irish woman swam both ways across the English Channel. It took her 35 hours. She was immersed in her ambition.

I go to work. Drama in real life. Woman faints on train. Two people step over her. I am one of them. I work in the bank. I bank on the work. Conditions are treacherous. A woman points her umbrella at me through the glass partition. Any day now I will be put into a safe while masked men leg it with the loot. Last week there was a gaping hole in the wall. Three men in a digger had ripped out the cashpoint. I listened for it on the news but never heard anything.

I come home. Man makes mixed grill. There is another Foot and Mouth scare but new research shows that the lycopene in heated tomatoes guards against prostate cancer.

I pour a beer from the fridge and steer myself to the sofa.

There is a crackdown on drink driving.

I settle down at 6 o' clock with the grill and the headlines. In Sligo a factory closed down. In the city there was greed. There was an earthquake, two car accidents, five floods, fifteen people killed in a bus. I watch the lead in, the top story, the reports, the sports and the entertainment. It's good to know that Jack is still with Billy or Jade or Jordan and that pet pampering parlours are the biggest growing business on the Southside.

My mother rang. She asked me if I had any news. I said no because I knew what she meant and the news is not my own, all this news I know. She gave me the local update: the men cut down in their prime, the sudden deaths, the births and marriages, the ironic twists of fate, the lottery winners, the motley sinners, the alcoholics and adulterers, the whole damn shebang of reckless humanity.

'No news then?' She asks again

'No news.'

I hear the radio in the background. I tell her I have to go. There is so much I have to attend to, another fatal road crash, another rise in unemployment.

I want to know what's happening. What's happening?

I heard a man walked on the moon. I heard he looked back at the blue Earth and cried a single tear. I heard the cheers. I saw the foot, the first step, the giant leap, the dawn of a new era. I saw mass hysteria. I saw Liverpool lads and a Tennessee boy with gyrating hips. I saw a test tube baby and a Royal wedding. I saw Grace and Diana.

I listen for news of myself. Man cuts himself shaving. Dogs barking in the night wake man in a cold sweat.

At nine o' clock there are bodies falling from the sky, fires raging, homes swept away, corporate embezzlement, methane bubbling under the melting permafrost, old men found frozen.

I make coffee, I stay up late. I catch news on the hour, the update on the half. I turn on the TV and watch the ticker tape blood-red news strip flicker. I pace into the corners of the small space — damp clothes and sweat. Newspapers piled in a heap, rising, falling.

It doesn't seem to matter if the news is old or new. I discover yesterday's tragedies. Buried children, crushed spectators. My eyes give way. I begin to crack, like a super glacier, I plummet like the stock exchange, I crumble like flood defences.

I go to bed. I can't get the people out of my head, a parade of the dead in the dark in the shadow strewn bedroom perpetual gloom the drumming humming roll call of doom. Later I appear in a post apocalyptic town, searching for someone, reeling at body parts, taking spiritual comfort from the tattered vestiges of globally branded advertising billboards.

I dream of Pompeii, of the initial loud crash, of the sound of rock renting, of the fiery spit gurgle tumbling rumbling of flaming filth, of the ash gently settling like poisonous snowflakes. Of the seeing, the fleeing, the families rolling themselves up like foetuses in the hot tombs the ash shored up against the door. The number of casualties is not yet known.

I wonder what will be in the news tomorrow?

A man has been found dead in his first floor apartment near the city centre. Not looking for anyone else in connection with the incident. A man gets dressed. Puts on his shoes, goes out, makes something of himself.

The next day is Saturday. A slow news day. Man gets up, goes to bathroom, urinates, scratches himself.

Man reaches for remote. Stops. Goes to the window.

Conditions have worsened overnight. An old man walks with dog along the frozen pavement. Battered trilby tilted against slanting sleet. Solo adventurer braves Arctic conditions. Triumph over adversity.

Man on street notices Man in Window Frame. Man looks at Man and Dog looking. Man and Dog switch to the comedy channel.

In our latest update the dog cocks his leg against a lamppost, shakes his head and trots away, laughing.

In other news man searches his soul, finds nothing. In the fridge milk has run out.

Man's reflection appears in darkening window. I watch the slow, parting smile of the newscaster.

And finally.

