

ANNIE SAUMONT (b. 1927)

The Finest Story in the World

Translated by Elizabeth Fallaize

Okay. Let's get things properly organized. Yes. The list. As usual.
She tears a page out from her notebook. Someone's gone off with my pencil again.

dry-cleaner's
Medical bump
parent's evening—Charlene
appointment paediatrician
water hydrangeas
paint velux
adaptor
cleaning stuff
frozen food order

She gets back from the dry-cleaner's. Crosses that off. She fills in the medical expenses claim form. Jean had flu then asthma. Jean's the one who doesn't want to go and live with his mother. She sticks the stamps on the form. Must get Pascal to sign it and send it off to his firm's insurance.

Parent's evening. Five o'clock sharp. She can drop the baby off at the playgroup.

Velux. That can wait.

There's another thing—not on the list, in her head—always being shelved, always back on the table that will have to get done one day, her wild dream of writing the finest story in the world.

Yes, everyone knows. *The Finest Story in the World* goes back nearly a century. For Kipling it was the story of the writer who tries to tell the finest story in the world but who abandons his project when the bank clerk holding the key to the story falls in love with the young salesgirl taken on by the tobacconist. And loses all interest in the story.

Woman, then, is an obstacle to writing.

But there are women who write.

She writes.

When she gets a spare minute. When everything is sparking. When the final of the Cupwinner's Cup is live on television and she can forget that she lives with a man who needs a sympathetic listener in the evenings. After a good dinner.

She starts cooking. She starts writing. The osso bucco bubbles gently then turns to cinders. She opens all the windows, puts the charred pan in to soak. Gets out a tin of sausages with lentils, meal-in-a-minute. No way is a burnt dinner going to mean the end of the finest story in the world. She's going to get this story written. Just as soon as she's scrawled an affectionate invitation to Aunt Josiane to come for the weekend—poor Aunt Josiane, lonely and depressed.

vacuum bag
tax payment
repot geraniums
clear chest of drawers
shorten curtains

She's writing.

She's writing in her notebooks. She enters it into the Mac. She writes while the baby's asleep. She writes between bouts of anxiety—has he vomited his bottle? That little spot on his cheek that she noticed just now, could it be the first symptom of some infectious illness? Why is he so quiet? She runs to check if he's still breathing.

She's writing. She's not writing. Charlene is whining, nobody likes me. Charlene is complaining that she's fat and ugly. Don't be so silly. Look at yourself in the mirror. I got D in my end of term test. Ooh! that's rather different. Charlene resolves to give up chocolate eclairs and to go through her homework in future with her mother.

go through homework
sort out writer clothes
ironing
mothball cupboards
senior citizens' club visit
press-studs, 50 cm velcro tape
fruit vegetables
subscription TV magazine

Jean wants to have his friends round one Saturday evening. For a mega rock and rap session. She shudders. Had no idea what she was taking on

when she agreed to be a stepmum. Chin up, others have been in the same boat. Listen Jean, we'll see. Just now I have to write. And it's time for your basketball training.

Write? says Jean. Write to who? Nobody writes any more. What for, with mobiles....

She's not writing. She is writing. In between she decides that the kids can use the garage and make sandwiches in the kitchen on condition that . . . But what's the point in having conditions when the promises are bound to be broken, recriminations inevitable. . . . Don't let Jean get on at you advises Pascal, retreating to the safety of his study. This from a man who has never been able to say no to his son.

From a man who has a study.
A room of one's own. How can she sort out a refuge for herself in a house of modest proportions in which the children all have their own room and Dad has a study?

There is no bar on writing the finest story in the world on the kitchen table. Nor on thinking about questions of syntax whilst stirring the tomato coulis with a wooden spoon.

Charlene's long hair is infested with vermin. The school nurse said to take emergency measures. Don't want my hair shaved off. The shampoo guarantees the nits will die a perfumed death. To be repeated twice more this week. Nits in the baby's hair. Bugs in the word processing system. Women and computers, Jean sniggers. You just pressed *shift* when you should've pressed *alt*. Shall I put it right for you, he suggests, good Samaritan. Okay, for the rock and rap session she will supply an enormous pizza and a whole crate of cans of coke. She will send Charlene off to her best friend's house for the night. And suggest to Pascal that it's about time they visited the grandmothers. She and Pascal and the baby will stay with one or other of them until Sunday afternoon. Heaving out through the hatchback a mountain of stuff, folding cot, high chair, pack of nappies, jars of baby food, inflatable bath, cleansing milk. Hello stranger. Thought you'd forgotten you had parents. Armelle—(Jean again)—Armelle, is my Beachmania T-shirt ready? Still in the dirty washing basket! I've got nothing left to wear.

Baby's gums are sore. Can she imagine writing the finest story in the world with her right hand, whilst rocking a baby with teeth coming through in the crook of her left arm?

I hate to disturb you, says Pascal, I don't suppose by any chance you've seen . . .

Have I seen, I haven't I seen, what can I say (the missing folder, the

watch that Pascal takes off and puts down in a different place every night, the credit card that he is quite sure he put away in its case, Jean's gameboy, Charlene's fluorescent pogs). See nothing, say nothing, hear nothing, keeping her head down, she writes. Ever since she was a kid she's dreamed of being a writer. Without ever telling her parents, they would have shrugged their shoulders, where does she get these funny ideas. Her mother would have added that girls need only

Yes: spin wool and keep house.

Peace at last. Then the telephone.

Elsa, her best friend from way back. Hello Armelle, Gérard is having an affair.

Look Elsa, you've thought this too many times before.

Armelle, this time I swear he is.

The tenth time at least (the twentieth even?) that Elsa has rung her in desperation, Help he's having an affair. That could be the subject of the saddest story in the world. And the most farcical.

The computer is purring. Charlene, watch the plug. Have I saved it. Pascal opens the door a crack, Armelle, would you have a second to read over my article, you're so good at spelling.

Charlene is complaining, the baby is just ridiculous, throws everything he's given on the floor. Next time, young man, I am not picking your car up. The Ferrari crashes noisily to the floor. Too bad, I warned you. The baby starts howling.

Just at that moment the health visitor rings at the door. Sorry, just a routine visit, don't take it the wrong way.

She doesn't take it the wrong way. Sighs.

While I'm here I wanted to let you know that the old lady next door is having problems remembering things. Perhaps you could, discreetly...

Mum, you said you'd help me make some paper flowers, the teacher wants them for the school fête. You haven't got time? Don't be surprised then when I don't get to move up to secondary school next year.

Wednesday. The kids out of school in the neighbourhood are making a racket. The play area down the street is showered in bits of glass. It takes her for ever to pick them up. What is the best way to give meaning to life? Write the finest story in the world or rid the planet of broken glass?

Or take a lover. She'll pick a good one. Rich and loving and generous. She'll talk to him. When they've made love. Pascal goes to sleep after lovemaking. The lover will listen to her. She'll tell him about writings, about how demanding it is. He'll understand.

He'll take her away from this place. Somewhere where no one needs her any more. Pascal will have to cope with Jean's behaviour, Charlene's moods, his aspirations in senior management, his choice of tie, the baby's vaccinations. And the plumbing. Far away beneath a panoramic blue sky she'll open her notebooks and fill them up in future without wasting any pages on lists of domestic tasks, blissfully untroubled by thoughts of shopping baskets.

No. There would be regrets and remorse. The pain of having hurt and betrayed. There would be anguish. The sky has turned grey.

And the finest story in the world will never be written.