

*nulla in mundo pax sincera*¹

I've never even thought about Vivaldi composing the piece. Mozart's Requiem, yes, the piece shouts out the man, and in my mind I see old Wolfgang, straining late at night, his wine glass empty, pressing at his eyes before scratching another string of notes out with his quill and then continuing with another, and another, and knowing how those first bars will affect people, so slow, so quiet as they well. But the Vivaldi, I don't think of the man. The music just lifts, teeters on a plateau too high for associations or imaginations to come into it. I like it most in the early mornings, when the sun is shining, loud, so loud on my stereo or my Walkman, and when it's finished I play it back again.

I listened over it once as I waited for the tram this morning, smiling helplessly in the sunlight as Škodas flew past on the grey tarmac, and I'd just about rewound it, gone a stop or two on the tram, and started over again when a man with a child entered the tram and the sturdy Czech woman opposite rose to hand her seat over to them. The man set the child on the red plastic seat and stood beside it. From this point I'm at a loss how to continue. This child, there was something extraordinary about him, a serene and beautiful profundity evident in his being. He was tiny, maybe two, maybe not that old, very fragile with limbs like sticks. His face was so curious looking, he had small eyes, eyes with the quality of having either shrunk or perhaps only opened for the first time, for they were creased around the edges, with irises so large you could hardly see the whites. They were blue his eyes, but like pale glass only half catching the light. A large forehead and skin so pale you could see the veins through it. His hair was dark blond, cropped short and tufty. He had a small, pale mouth, half open to reveal a rim of teeth half grown in. Can you imagine him, toto? He appeared otherworldly. Oh and his hands, they were so tiny, but exquisitely formed with comparatively long, thin fingers. Really, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I thought him terribly beautiful but at the same time I could imagine others might look at him and be frightened, his features, their proportions, were so unusual. I could imagine his parents, catching themselves off guard, questioning within their minds whether their child was ugly, wondering if it was only their love which made him so beautiful in their eyes (later, remembering these thoughts, perhaps as they watched their child sleeping, they would feel a pang of guilt).

As he sat on the red seat, his feet just reaching over the edge, I watched him. The music was still playing loud, filling my ears so I couldn't hear anything else on the tram, and as we sped down the hill he began to cry. That sounds wrong, like I mean self-pitying childish tears, it was nothing like that, it was much baser, a welling of those glassy eyes, the corners of his mouth pulled back with fear, and I dare say he was hardly making a sound. His strange eyes were fixed on the city rushing past in the window. One hand was clutching round his father's thumb, the other

gripping the edge of the seat, so tight and strained the knuckles looked as though they could pierce the skin. I can't express how the sight moved me.

Seeing his fear, the father picked up the boy and sat down with him on his lap. The child seemed to fit himself perfectly against the man's shape, like he was more malleable than ordinary flesh and bone. All the while his tiny hands were clutching at his father's sweater, reaching and clutching like you see baby monkeys do. I couldn't help myself staring. When they reached their stop and rose to get off I strained in my seat to watch to the last moment that tiny head bobbing over its father's shoulders. I can't really explain why this incident had such an effect on me. It will sound silly to you I know. But it was really quite special, verging on the religious, and I can't get that tiny face from my mind. I just wanted to tell you about it.

Love Clara² xxx

¹'*In this world there is no honest peace*' – the first line of a motet by Vivaldi (which, incidentally and we think delightfully, concludes with the line, 'a man maddened by love will often kiss as if licking honey'). If you were reading this in an enhanced e-book edition, we would probably have included a recording of the motet to accompany Clara's letter. As it is, you may wish to source your own recording and play it at an appropriately encompassing volume, perhaps through headphones, while you read.

² Clare Wigfall's debut collection of stories, *The Loudest Sound and Nothing*, was published by Faber in 2007. In 2008 she won the BBC National Short Story Award. We're not sure why she signed this letter from 'Clara'; a pseudonym, perhaps. She lives in Berlin, and wrote us this letter to explain the letter that she sent:
'Being asked for a letter set me thinking about all the letters I used to write. I'm not sure when I stopped. Somewhere in my mid-twenties, I guess.

Only recently, moving boxes I'd long had in storage in Prague, I came across the letters I'd received in the years after I first moved to the city. So many of them! Thick bundles of correspondence tied up with string. Postmarks from cities far away – Oxford, Long Beach, Iquitos. Handwriting that was still instantly recognisable. Letters from family, others from my now-husband, but by far the largest bundles from a few close friends I used to correspond with regularly. What struck me reading through them again was the intimacy of those friendships, the evident affection. And also our youth! We hadn't yet written books, or had children, we'd not yet married (or divorced!), I'm not sure we even had bank accounts – we knew we weren't grown-ups yet and there was a kind of euphoria in the way we embraced that knowledge!

So I'm giving you one now – a bonus letter if you will. It's one that I can remember writing very clearly. A bright spring morning in early 1999. I was 22. Working for a Czech art gallery. As soon as I arrived that day I sat down and wrote this letter to my friend Tod, typing it up on the computer so it would look like I was working (that's the only reason I still have a copy now). I posted it the same day, but for some reason I can't recall now it never arrived with my friend. I assumed it lost until one day, months afterwards, it landed back in my postbox in Prague. I later gave it to him in person.'