The Speed of Light and How it Cannot Help Us

We've visited our son almost every week for the past sixteen years. In the region of 800 times, or thereabouts. It's a two-hour-forty-five-minute drive these days, each way, since they opened the new highway a couple of years back, shaving the better part of half an hour off the journey.

We've driven somewhere around 265,000 miles. That's more than the distance to the moon. That's more than the circumference of this planet, times ten. It's hard to believe. It's roughly the same amount of time it might take you to run 900 marathons at a slow jog.

We sit usually for a few minutes, in the parking lot, before we go in. Decompressing from the journey a little, and steeling ourselves. When those moments end, when it's time to get out of the car and go through the rigmarole of the security screening, the endless waiting for Eli to be brought through so we can talk to him, by telephone, through a reinforced mesh-glass window – we haven't physically touched him since the last court date, the last appeal, three years ago – my brain has trouble sending signals to my body, trouble instructing it to move, to get out of the car. I feel stuck, immobilised by gravity, and Jack waits patiently for me, sometimes for a long time, to become unstuck, so that we can go inside.

'You ready, Honey?' he always says eventually, and the answer is almost always: No, I'm not, I'm ready to leave here and never come back. Though of course I don't say this.

The truth is, going there – I do it for Jack, for my husband, as much as for Eli or myself.

I know a lot of people say things like this about their children, but Jack loved that boy more than you'd think was possible. He loved both of them that way, and still does, the two of them.

And I do too, I think, though I've found love to be a more complicated thing than I ever imagined it could be.

I've been asked before if I really believe it. That he didn't do it. You'd be surprised what people will ask you, out of the blue. People you barely even know. People who don't know *you* at all. I've been asked – and told – far worse than that, as it happens, especially in the beginning. Not that it bothers me any more, after all this time – I've asked myself the same things more times than you could count, and the questions don't go away, even when you think you know the answers.

Though some questions don't have anything you could rightly call an answer.

When it happened – when we found out at first, I mean, when we arrived home like any other evening, when we arrived to the chaos and turmoil on our quiet street and assumed, naturally, that the turmoil, whatever it was, must belong to someone else, to some unlucky neighbour – when we were told and informed and notified, none of it making any sense, standing outside our own home like strangers watching a car wreck, before it had even begun to sink in (how does something like this ever sink in, you might wonder, and you'd be right) I remember it was just getting dark outside, and all those lights and people— I can remember thinking it all looked like some fancy Christmas scene; carol singers maybe, and a manger in there

somewhere amongst all the bright blue and red lights and spectators shuffling their feet in the cold and the yellow tape just then being strung about the place by two men in uniforms.

This was at the house. Outside the house. With Eli's face pleading out at us from the back window of one of the police cars – handcuffed, I think, though I didn't actually see them, the handcuffs. It was more the way his body seemed to be struggling towards us, looking over his shoulder. Unable to move his arms. Straining just to see us. He was only fifteen. He is now more than twice that.

They wouldn't let us speak to him, or even go near him. *Why*, I kept hearing myself ask. Why couldn't I?

And Jack was yelling. Trying to understand what was happening, trying to get answers from the police.

'Where's Jacob?' we kept asking them. Where was our other son?

And why can't we go inside?

There is a lot of time to think, on the drives. I think about numbers, distances, things like space and the universe and the speed of light. Even as a girl on long drives I would add and multiply numbers in my mind, repetitiously, constantly. To pass the time, I suppose. I don't know.

Eight minutes is roughly how long it takes, you might remember from school, for light from the sun to reach the earth. I can almost see the particles – or is it waves, or both? – streaming towards us, directed dead-set, faster than anything else that can ever exist. And yet

eight minutes… I think about how far light would have travelled in the time that it took. From the beginning of it, I mean – of the incident. To its end.

Eight minutes is probably not even close.

The light emitted from the sun when it began was proably not even half way here by the time it was finished.

Jacob was moved, they said. Between the intial instigation of the incident and its culmination. Carried, actually, they said they could tell. From the bottom of the stairs into the kitchen, where the stabbings occurred. They could also tell, they said, these experts, that he was most likely unconscious by this point. And it's that detail, of all the details, which visits me most. The image of Jacob unconscious, as if asleep, being carried, cradled, that short distance, thirteen steps – almost one for each year of his life – and placed on the cold tile floor; perhaps gently, perhaps not.

They had theories about that, during the trial. About his being carried, about his being moved at all. But nothing you could call conclusive.

I think it's true what they say about women sometimes, about us being more emotional. Having a greater emotional range. Intuition. A broader emotional spectrum, they'd probably call it now. A mother knows her children the way only a mother can – we notice certain things that men don't, is what I think it is, in the same way that the opposite is also true.

Not that Jack isn't emotional. Weighed up I'd say he's more emotional than most – man or woman – including me. He's always been that way, and it was one of the things I first loved about him. But it's a forward moving, driven sort of a thing. It's directed, entirely

focused, tunnel-like. Unimpeachable and unbreachable. Whereas my own emotions feel more like a fog, drifting and amorphous.

Jack's initial reaction was… He said to me: 'Sarah,' he said, and then his face changed into some sort of face you couldn't even apty *call* a face, one I'd never seen before and one that only lived just once, for those few seconds, and never again after that, he said: 'Jesus, Sarah, I think he did this, I think Eli—'

Or maybe that was at the hospital, later, that he said that. After they'd finally let us see Jacob, our other little boy, laid out on cold steel, his tiny form visible beneath a spotless white sheet, just like in a movie or a tv show. It all seems so confused now, still, when I try to remember the sequence of things.

I said something to Jack like *How could you*. How could you even think it, your own son. I may even have slapped him. I think I did. Because love, real love, the love of a mother, no matter how complicated – if you love another human being in such a way, the force of it is a physical, primal thing, and you would bleed all your blood, and believe that light was day, if it could help them even just a little.

And I think I needed Jack to be the one without any doubt. The one in charge. At the time we were both, I imagine, in what they would now call clinical shock. In effect it was not not just Jacob's life that was lost that day, but mine and Jack's too. And of course Eli's.

Four lives in just a few short minutes; the mind can't work fast enough to make any true sense of that.

The recording of the 911 call lasted over seven minutes. I didn't hear it until the trial itself, and it was a heartbreaking thing to have to listen to. To hear Eli's voice. The broken tremor in it. The terror. And those sporadic moments of silence on the line before the dull sound of sirens arrived in the background, the pauses, where all you could do was picture him there in the kitchen, phone in hand, standing over his little brother, waiting for help that was already too late in coming. By now I know it by heart, the recording. I obtained a copy. There's a roteness to it it, I think – to the listening.

I don't tell Jack, but I listen to it still, all the time.

After that one moment of weakness from Jack, about Eli doing it, being responsible for it, for this thing that was done, there was never another. Not in my presence, anyway. His drive – his entirety, I think – went into Eli's innocence. There was never any question of it again, even during the trial, after all the endless hours of evidence and specimens and photographs and testimonies.

When we were finally allowed to see Eli at the police station, after we'd been to the hospital, after we'd seen Jacob, I remember Jack saying over and over, over and over, *We will get you out don't worry we will, we will get you out we will, we believe you we love you we believe you*. We were hysterical, practically.

Jack says it still – that we will get him out. And he believes it too.

Eli said – and his story never changed, never wavered, not a single detail, even in the interviews with the police, with those grown men prodding and threatening and terrifying the wits out of him, just a child; and nor has it changed in the sixteen years since – that when he heard noises he came downstairs from his bedroom and found Jacob lying there in the

kitchen, the back door open, the back door left ajar, his little brother covered in blood, the knife discarded there beside him.

We go on, season after season, year after year. What else can we do? No longer young nor middle-aged parents now, but older ones, of grandparenting age.

I estimate we've burned through almost 8,000 gallons of fuel over the years. That's as much, if you're interested, as those great big tubular gasoline trucks can hold, filled to the brim and then some. It's something I total up in my mind, these things, a habit, just to take my mind away from where it is, and where it sometimes goes.

I told a therapist about all of this a few years back. About what she was probably correct in terming a somewhat obsessive fixation. The numbers, the counting, the incessant adding-up and multiplying, comparing distances, thinking almost ceaselessly about things like time and space and the speed of light – I told her about that in particular, I remember, the speed of light. And about how time and space can change, can alter – or so they say, these scientists with minds that work on different frequencies, at different levels to the rest of us. I don't entirely understand it.

She called it a coping mechanism. 'Whatever helps,' she said.

And she may have been right, or she may not.

I paced it out myself, the distance between the stairs and the kitchen. It would've taken in the region of ten seconds, under the circumstances, to cover those thirteen steps; and for such a short time it's an awfully long time, too.

But these things, distance or time or light, these concepts – in the end they're not a whole lot of use. It doesn't make anything better, does it, the world turning, light and space and time. The things that simply are, or have been. And why would it?

There's a lot of time to try to figure these things out over the course of a drive to the moon, a drive ten times around the globe. And there are other things, of course, that no normal mind could ever truly comprehend.

There is a sound, if you listen very closely, about two minutes into the recording. Just barely. It went unmentioned, unnoticed, at the trial. The kind of sound that's barely a sound at all, the kind of sound so slim and so buried beneath the other sounds of the recording, the static and the operator's voice and the strangled utterings of Eli, that only someone who's heard it a million times before, who knows it, who has it subconsciously embedded in the back of their brain, could ever possibly discern or distinguish.

That sound is very much like the sound of the handle on the back door of our home being pushed down, unlatched; it is very much like the sound of the back door being opened,the back door being left ajar.

He will be eligible for parole in nine years, Eli, at the age of forty.

The statistical life expectancy rate dips by almost twenty-five years for those in long-term incarceration – incarceration from youth, that is. The suicide rate rises by a factor of four, and more than half are hangings.

Bedsheets, presumably.

These are more numbers and figures and concepts I think about occasionally, on the long drives. More often than occasionally, in truth. The thoughts flow almost separate from me, these ones, the darkest of daydreams, the darkest of fantasies. I know I am a terrible person.

I imagine getting the call one day, from the prison authorities. I imagine how it might feel.

It feels like a heavy fog, lifting.