
Line of Sight – excerpt fae a novel in progress

John Bolland

Fit aabody disnae ken is this.

The pixelation generally applied tae aa the apertures an orifices o a premises, preventin street surveillance cameras peekin in, kin be suspendit at the sole discretion o the operator subject, in the normal rin o circumstance, tae review an subsequent endorsement o said suspension by a superior within a period no exceedin' twinty-eight days fae the instant o suspension.

So there wiz Margaret wi the bairn laid-oot, airms raised above his hied. She wiz buttonin up the loon in his papoose, tuggin the woollen bunnet ower his cheeks an then the hoodie so as jist his neb an thick-lasht een wur visible inside the bundelt cotton, wool an quilt. She pullt the draa-string at his thrapple, tuggit doon the mittens ower baith cleuks an neshed the hoodie o the snowsuit up, tight an toastie.

Aat day Margaret hid oan thon rid jumper an thon green lycra leggings, ken.

Thi operator hiz discretion tae suspend the normally applied pixellation o windies an entries if, based on circumstantial evidence, he hiz reason tae suspect felonies or acts o subversion or conspiracy likely tae eventuate in acts o terror or related forms o civil unrest.

Thi air in the parlour wiz waarm. The temperature outdoors oan Seafield Street wiz 12 degrees ablo.

An thon snell win wiz reevin ower the pack-ice oot o Asia - fur Asia is closer by the day noo - ye kin walk there fae Portsoy three months in the year. The jeel in February strips heat an moisture fae the skin an burns. A tattle-tale o pallor – aat's the sign, ken – Ah see it oan the screen sometimes, a buddy pinched an davered an in jeopardy o frostbite. Ah canna warn them bit. Maun watch in silence unless a threat tae public order is detectit. S'whit Ah dae.

Aat Setterday, Margaret pit oan salopettes, a puffa jacket . Affy braw.

Ah hid anticipatit watchin her as she wiz kittin up but she passt fae ma line o sight, leavin' the loon still lyin oan his back oan thon kitchen table proppt atween the coffee jar an aa her bukes. Ah speculatit how she zippt up oot o sight an closed the velcro seals oan her ensemble.

Portsoy wiz niver meant tae be secure. It's aa these strips o hooses hard-fronted on the street that gie the cameras nae purchase. The fishers hae nae greens nor patios tae the front. Their steps press tae the paving flags like pettit lips. Here life's lived tae the back an ben the hoose, lang greens an gairdens striped ahin high wa's o slate an granite – backs chokit wi snaa these winter months, snaa slouched an slewed an crusting ower an here re-crystalised like sugar-loaf tae sparkle in ony glimpse o sun. Trenches ur dug oot tae empty coal bunkers an thon recycle bins lined up in every

midden. Nae policy hiz a back gate. The toon stauns humphy-backit, keeps its counsel, thraan.

She re-appearit, bootit, her rid hair hidden aneath a hat o white coneys's fur, its ear-flaps trochled doon an tied aneath her face. She swept up the bairn an cairtit him ben the lobby. Contact lost. The front door opent.

It hadna snaad in weeks. The street hid bin swept clear bit the slate slabs an fractured concrete wiz slippery still. You wak wi discretion cairryin a bairn. Safer tae set him doon, Ah tend tae think. She disna. Cairts the bairn (he's nearly twa) fae tap tae bottom o the toon like a fairground prize she wanna pairt wi. She hudna brought her gear Ah notit. Nae camera. Nae tripod. An she wiz headin doon the brae. Doon the brae? There's naething there bit ice an Wally's shop...

Ma personal preference is niver tae adjust the line o sight o ony camera in the burgh without a pressin reason. Promiscuous realignments ur like tae be noticed by the general populace. Sich movements encourage the presumption that specific acts or behaviours ur bein focussed on. This, in turn, implies that summat is bein misst. Ironically, folk ur apt tae feel baith mair insecure an less on-best-behaviour gif they believe the array is focussed someplace else. They dinna ken the blindspots aat exist there onywe. Deterrence dinna need ful coverage as lang as suspects dinna ken the meenit.

Ten steps past her ain front door an Margaret wiz lost, aince mair, fae view.

Thi harbour then or Wally's shop?

Ah tappit-up screens 3, 6 an 9. Empty streets. Spindrift racketing up the braes fae the frigid blaw that's rummeled into toon across the harbour wa', shinned up ower broken iceslabs in the basin, skittered up the streets. A quarter efter three but light like a dentit bell, flat grey an ringin caal. Cloud settlit ower us.

A buddy turnt the corner o Church Street an stertit tae wauchle up the hill. Short hunched encumbered wifie. Ah needna zoom tae see she wiz ma mither.

Fit wye wid she be scramblin up aat brae?

An the quine appearit, big an foreshortened aneath the camera, bairn on her hip, tall as a giantess, wi the white fur tremblin on her hat. Doon the hill like a battleship she goes an Mither strugglin up like the flooers o the forest. Ah dinna think they'd spik. Fit wye wid they spik?

They frontit each other. The path wis narrow. Aat wiz the thing. They spikit.

It's nae convenient. Tae see an nae tae hear. Ah mean - ye see the act, ye see the flesh, bit canna guess intent - maun rustle up yer ain sub-titles tae the show. Ah dae that sometimes. Essential tae the task Ah'd say.

Aat efterneen Ah couldna guess an didnae waant tae see... Ah ging

through-by tae get a coffee, left the screens.

Ah cannae help bit see bit – speculate -as if each screen is aatimes present an on-line inby ma skull – Ah check tae verify, ye ken? Bit jist tae synchronise like. Ah see whit ah expect tae see – no whit Ah want tae see – Ah ken the difference.

Ma mither spikit wi Margaret Smithermann oan Church Street brae an Ah could not be daen wi it.

“Fit like, quinie?” the Mither mebbe seys. Ah hear this play. The coffee’s shite as ever.

Her back tae camera, the tall quine smiles thon well-upfeshed an desperate smile.

“Fine. Fine,” she funs it in hersel tae sey.

“An the loonie?” Mither’d ask.

“He’s OK,” Margaret seys, her Doric aa rin dry.

“Good good.” the Mither smiles. Nae better than she shuld be, aat een, she wid thocht. Aye, Mither. “Doon i shoppie?” still she’d ask.

“Yes.” Margaret seys. “Yes.”

“Hurry on then. It’ll shut.” ma mither’d cast a glance doon the steep incline towards the bay. The light wiz gaan quick, the sky the hue o watter mixed wi bleach an staint wi stoor. Ayont them baith, the ice stretcht, grey an white, towards the far horizon. Lichts – no many nowadays an late on. Maist wanna light up till the mirk is dense.

Thi Mither pokes her mittened haun atween the quinie’s breist an the bairn’s neb, excitit as a loon bird-nesting. Margaret’d wrench her tittie clear o Mither’s probe.

“Well, well,” Mither’d sey, contentit. “Best chaff on.”

Margaret lurches into motion doon the hill leavin Mither tae turn sickerlie on the treacherous sclither o the brae.

Ah see whit Ah expect - an when Ah sit back doon aat’s fit Ah see. The hizzy an her bairn at the braefoot. Mither grown large in perspective near oan me.

Fit diz she ken? Ah wunner.

Thi wifie Margaret’s nae a quine, ken. No in that sense. That is tae say - she’s forty-twa year auld. Elderly primagravida, assumin the loon’s her first - an records indicate nae ither bairns, so aat maun be. Furst fruits in her fortieth year an her a spinster still. Black as the earl-o-hell’s waistcoat tae, the bairn, an she sae pale - well, whit Ah’d seen o her thus far. Pale-pale wi rid-rid hair an tall an slender still an forty-twa year auld. Ah say quine because...bit she’s nae.

Mither progressit gey slowly up the Church Street brae an, a few yerds afore the stanchion, lookit up, winkt an gied a wave. Clockt me up here abune it aa watchin ower her an hers. She passt on oot o sight. Ah guesst tae screen 11 then 14. Oor ain door’s oan screen 5 an that wid be her

habitual trajectory fae Church Street tae the hoose - 11,14,5. Ah dread tae ask fit wye she wiz near the harbour in the efterneen.

Wally's lang gone bit the shoppie that bears his name is oan screen 4. Bein commercial premises it is exempt fae pixellation.

For additional security, an tae encourage the clientele tae forage on the shelves towards the back-shoppie, the 8-til-late franchise is still illuminatit by strip-lightin tho Egg, the manageress, hiz removit every second tube tae save oan power. The brightness o the grocery contrasts wi the gaithering gloom in the street outside an, tae see in, Ah maun adjust the levels oan the signal-processor. Margaret buys dried beans an tinned tomatoes, biscuits an a loaf.

Egg spake tae her. It wiz probably about the bairn. Folk tak an interest in a bairn nae metter whit. Margaret smilet an noddit. Peyed an left. Dried beans an tinned tomatoes, Ah thocht. Jings.

Ah scanned the screens, adjustin the signal-gain tae compensate fur deepening shadow. 1-2-3-4-5- the licht in oor front room was oan, the pixel-fog glimmerin' bright like a hovering ghost. Mither hid made it hame.

Truth tae tell, there's nothing happens oan these streets in February as the mercury plummets doon ablo the minus twinty merk. Een the maist determint miscreant is perpetrating vile dysfunctions in the warmth an comfort o somebody's hoose - even gif it's nae his ain. An there ah canna peek unless... Ah might as well...bit Ah dinna.

Ah set up the twa secondary screens tae scan at random atween the eighteen cameras that cover aa the centre o Portsoy. Ah switcht the primary back tae Margaret's place an waited fur her tae switch ma light oan.

Dried beans an tinned tomatoes, eh?

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