



The Mess

by Sally O'Reilly

Somewhere, a shoelace has just come undone. Someone bends over to retie it and their cotton tote, filled with books, slumps into a puddle. Somewhere else, a car has stalled at a zebra crossing. The re-ignition of the engine and a muttered curse send it on its way again, leaving a whiff of annoyance in the air for someone else to inhale. And somewhere else again, a cell's genetic structure is replicating incorrectly. The creature in which it participates feels nothing. This cell will continue to keep up its end of the bargain of life, but following the wrong instructions. It will grow and duplicate, grow and duplicate needlessly. And so will its duplicates grow and duplicate, grow and duplicate needlessly. Disastrously.

What I'm saying here is that things go wrong all the time. These things can be put right to varying degrees but, at the very least, a little bit of wrong will always linger. A whole lot of wrong will have a momentum of its own. But even a little smudge or butt or flake of wrong can hitch a ride on a new host, find a fresh path of destruction.

This is the universal law of entropy. It is a law that no one can break. Let's say you're in prison. Falsely accused and unfairly convicted. It's your first week and you're using your manners, asking what your new housemates 'do'. 'Fraud', they tell you, or 'murder' or 'burglary'. No one will have broken the law of entropy. Even the one who says 'organised crime' organises moral chaos in the most pathetically local terms. The universal law of entropy stands above all. No one can repeal this law. Protest would be meaningless. All we can do is tidy up after it. But since it is ongoing, there is no definitive 'after'. There is no ceiling to this 'up'. And this is life's ultimate description: a perpetual tidying up and up and up and up until we run out of stamina. Thankfully, we have social institutions to take on the basics: education tidies thought, policing tidies action, the courts tidy relationships, hospitals tidy bodies and psychologies. And there are prisons for the profoundly untidyable. Most adults have personal strategies too. They tidy their lesser mess-ups into an apology. They shave off a million micro-irrelevances to make a story. They do exercise to offset their sloppy diets. They channel the clatter of their emotions into glossy love affairs. A glass of wine or whiskey trims frayed nerves. Laughter conceals stains.

I know all this because I'm going to be a scientist. I make observations and think things through. Although this is precisely what has delivered me to my predicament. The shoelace has come undone, the car has stalled, the genes self-corrupted and I am sat here in the interview room, supposedly in disgrace, while my friends stride out into new chapters.

My friends spent their gap years on long trips to the southern hemisphere, to experience new timbres of mess. I went a few miles down the train line to the Sea Life Centre to gain experiences pertinent to my studies. I spent the year wiping spit and ice cream off the thick glass fronts of aquarium tanks, skimming litter out of rock pools and feeding phytopaste to buckets of live rotifers to feed to fish larvae. My work was pivotal to the ecosystem. Without me, the place would have flipped over: sea life would have given way to city life.

In fact, I was a little too successful in my job. Thanks to me, the jellyfish flourished, the turtles prospered, the dolphins calved. Populations rose. Waters became crowded. Crabs nipped clownfish, seahorses trampled anemones, eels choked lobsters, rays stung angelfish, catfish pounced on sharks. Children screamed at the carnage. Parents complained. Parties stopped booking. The centre was heading for disaster. Being my fault, it fell to me to tidy up the mess.

I scheduled my brilliant solution for the evening of 7th of September, the third day of the school term. The centre's opening times had narrowed, the summer's sunlight and noise lessened. The staff had gone home, exhausted after a day of crisis management. Most of my friends had made it back from Thailand or Bolivia, and were preparing to leave for universities and apprenticeships around the country. A barbecue would mark this important moment. Everyone came. They brought buns and sauces and cans of lager and half-drunk bottles of liqueur. I brought my parents' portable barbecue and fired it up and oversaw the grilling. I cooked only species that were a) over-crowded and b) edible. Starfish, terrapins, piranhas... I took no risks with safety. No puffer fish or rays. And I stayed clear of anything endangered.

It was more than a party. It was a brilliant technological riposte to entropy. But sentimentality warps judgement, and now I am accused of a greater wrong than simply having done too well in the first place. University term is about to start. My friends, on the threshold of the adult world, are away, crying at night. And I, who took chaos in hand, am confined here, staring down a life that I no longer recognise.