

Becoming Someone

An identity 'Annethology'

Anne Goodwin



Madonna and Child

THE WHINE OF the bin lorry had her hurtling out of bed, leaving the door to the flat ajar as she dashed, barefoot, downstairs. Gagging at the stench from the partly-open lid, she grabbed the handle of the wheelie bin and lugged it across the cracked paving to the street. But the refuse lorry was already turning the corner, leaving behind a cluster of emptied bins belonging to the more organised tenants of the apartment block. “Fuck!”

From across the road, an au pair en route from the posh houses to the shops appraised her coldly. The Betty Boop T-shirt she wore as a nightdress barely covered her buttocks and her hair was always a nightmare first thing. Gemma gave the au pair the finger and trundled the wheelie bin to its parking-place by the back door, the rough paving damp beneath her feet.

Whatever she did, however hard she tried, it was never enough. This was only a small disappointment, but brick by brick her small disappointments and failures massed into a substantial wall. And her day hadn't even started.

Why didn't her neighbours help out more? Was it beyond them to drag *her* bin around to the front along with their own? After all, a bin-load of shitty nappies languishing by the back door until the next collection would offend them as much as Gemma. But they'd do anything to get back at her for the noise.

Now the stairwell was uncannily quiet. Had the door to her flat slammed shut? Clad in nothing but a T-shirt, and with a hungry baby on the other side, she'd be fucked if it had. Gemma took the stairs two at a time.

The door stood open, and silence reigned within. Brilliant – but also rather weird. Weird too was another kind of absence: being snubbed by the bin-men added only a tiny brick – the smallest piece of Lego instead of a chunk of breezeblock – to the wall. Most days felt like running a marathon while taking an exam, with a hangover and no time for training or revision. Today Gemma felt almost normal, the teenager she would have been if she hadn't been caught out. Her mother used to nag her about the benefits of a good night's sleep, but she hadn't bothered to teach her how to achieve such a thing on her own with a baby. Gemma calculated the hours of slumber: the bin lorry usually came around half-nine and Milly had finally got off to sleep a little after three. Six solid hours of zzz!

Tiptoeing into the bed-sitting-room, a new feeling swept over her, colonising the space left by the departure of fatigue, frustration and rage. Asleep in the cot, Milly was like a doll fresh from the factory, only more perfect. A surge of love tempted Gemma to gather up the baby and smother her with kisses, but she resisted. Milly must be exhausted after several hours howling before Gemma had finally got her quiet. No point disturbing her now.

Easing open the wardrobe door, Gemma recalled her pride at primary school, gaining top marks in a test. Deep down, she'd

always believed she'd get it right eventually with Milly. At last, her persistence had paid off.

She selected an outfit for Milly to wear later – a proper old-fashioned baby-dress with frills and bows and layers of petticoats she'd been saving for a christening that had never happened – and laid it on the bed. For herself, she chose a black miniskirt and low-cut glittery top she'd last worn at the school Christmas party. She had to lift the clotheshorse off the bath and dump it in the hallway to use the shower, and then it was only a rubber hose shoved onto the taps that released a mere trickle of water, but it felt so good she screamed. A proper mother at last!

Admiring her reflection in the wardrobe mirror as Milly slept on, the doorbell rang. She closed the door to the bed-sitting-room before answering. The postman – Dylan Iversen from school – handed her a heap of junk mail he could easily have slipped through the letterbox. “I thought you must be out. Quiet as a morgue in here.”

“Milly's having her morning nap.”

“Makes a change. I usually hear her screaming from the bottom of the stairs.”

Another brick. Gemma crushed it. *I'm her mother and those sneering old biddies at the bus stop can mind their own business.* “She's got a strong pair of lungs.”

As Dylan turned to go, Gemma noticed the butterfly tattoo on his neck. Did he have that at school? It looked so pretty and cheerful, she called him back, “I was gonna put the kettle on.”

“Thanks. I could murder a coffee.”

Gemma tamped down a flutter of anxiety as he stepped into the flat. She and Milly weren't used to visitors. She hoped he was too preoccupied with setting down his bulky mailbag to notice her grey underwear amid the damp babygros as she bundled the

clotheshorse back into the bathroom, then ushered him into the kitchen.

“Awesome having your own place,” said Dylan.

Filling the kettle, Gemma shrugged. Up until then the flat had felt more Milly’s than hers. Squeezing past him to get the semi-skimmed from the fridge, she imagined the place seeming small and shabby to someone who still lived in a proper house with his parents.

“You look nice,” said Dylan. “Going out?”

“Nowhere special. I might take Milly down the shops later.”

“Mind if I tag along?”

“I thought you were working.”

“I get off at two.”

Was he taking the piss? They’d flirted a bit at school, but a lad with a butterfly tattoo wouldn’t want to saddle himself with a girl with a baby. Even if she did have her own place. She handed him a mug.

“Why not get a babysitter and we’ll go down the pub. I could beat you at pool.”

“I’ve no money for the babysitters.”

“Can’t you ask your mum?”

Gemma grabbed the dishcloth and scrubbed at the worktop. “Milly’s my responsibility.”

“We’ll go for a walk then. The three of us. This afternoon.”

“If you want.” Gemma imagined his hands beside hers on the pram. She brushed the hope away. “Don’t blame me if you’re bored. Everything’s ten times slower with a baby.”

“I know that. I’ve been changing nappies for my sister’s kids since I was twelve. I probably know more about babies than you do.” Putting down his mug, Dylan edged towards the door. “I could show you if you like.”

“She’s sleeping.”

“Let’s check.” Finger pressed theatrically to his lips, Dylan tiptoed into the tiny lobby. With only three doors to choose between, the main door marked by the letterbox and the bathroom door wide open, it was obvious where he’d find Milly.

Torn between irritation at his presumption and relief at someone else taking control, Gemma followed. As before, Milly lay on her back, saturated with sleep. Pride flushed her cheeks as she imagined Dylan whispering, *Good as gold. How do you do it?* Yet Dylan frowned as he edged towards the cot. She had to admit that, with the curtains blocking the daylight, the baby looked a bit dull. Gemma indicated the dress on the bed. “I’ll put that on her when we go out.”

Grimacing, Dylan touched Milly’s cheek. Then he leant right over the cot and put his own cheek against her face. As if expecting a sleeping child to kiss him. So much for being experienced with babies.

He turned to her briefly, his expression unrecognisable, as if he hadn’t asked her out five minutes before. Gemma made a clown face like she used at school to entertain her friends, but it was wasted on Dylan. He bent over the cot again and pressed his mouth against Milly’s.

“What the fuck are you up to?” Had she invited a paedophile into her home?

Turning his head aside, Dylan took a gulp of air before clamping his mouth back on Milly’s. Fortunately, there wasn’t a whimper of complaint from Milly, but that didn’t stop Gemma from tugging at Dylan’s arm. “Leave her alone, you bastard!”

Shaking her off, Dylan became even more aggressive towards the baby. Throwing the Jemima Puddleduck quilt on the floor, he yanked her from her cot by the ankles and slapped her back. Gemma rushed at him, trying to squeeze between this monster and her child.

Dylan screamed at her, but she couldn't make out the words. Something about not crying, but what kind of pervert would enjoy making a baby cry? Everything was confused. Laying her back in the cot, Dylan looked close to tears himself.

As Dylan pushed her backwards towards the bed, Gemma feared his next move would be to rape her. She kicked out, hoping for the groin area. Dylan sprang back and reached into his pocket for his phone. Sitting on the bed, propped against the wall, Gemma planned her next move. While he was preoccupied, could she make a dash for the door? But she couldn't leave without Milly, and she couldn't get to the cot without attracting Dylan's attention. Her head felt heavy, as if she'd been drugged.

Dylan finished his call. "Would you like to hold her till they come?" In contrast to his previous behaviour, his voice was gentle. His movements too, as he scooped Milly from her cot and laid her in her mother's arms.

Gemma stroked the baby's cold grey cheek. So still. So quiet. So perfect. Like she'd been the last time Gemma put her down, not long after three that morning. This was her daughter. She was a mother. It had been a struggle for the two of them, but now it was fine. Peace and harmony: Madonna and child.

After Icarus

HE CRUISES THROUGH the troposphere, parting the clouds with his arms like a swimmer. Effortless: his body as light as a bride's veil. He could go on like this for ever. Not going anywhere in particular. Just going.

Far below, the regular people are fussing about their homes and jobs and families, erecting the petty obstacles that make their world go round. Here in the realm of birds – whose chatter is only of the latest workout for wings, and the juiciness of slugs – he truly belongs.

ON THE FIRST Tuesday of the month, I call in at the surgery for my prescription. Today there is a new lady on the reception. Her frizzy hair is the colour of a robin's breast. She looks at my form and says, You can't have your prescription until you've seen the doctor for a medication review.

So I go, Okay, and take a seat in the waiting area among the out-of-date magazines.

And she calls across, You can't see him now. There are no more appointments left today.

So I go, Okay, give me one for tomorrow.

And she shakes her head and says, You can't make an appointment at this time of day. You have to ring up between half-past eight and half-past nine in the morning.

So I go, Thank you, miss, and head back home.

LATCHING ONTO A thermal, he is carried through the blue, the air caressing his cheek like a lover. It's all so easy for those few lucky enough to have discovered how arms can be made to function as wings.

Over the houses of the regular people he goes. The obstructive people, the no-you-can't-have-it people who, unlike him, will never experience the exhilaration of flight.

IF YOU WANT to know something about me: well, I've got two eyes, a nose and a mouth. I live in this city and my name is ... No, let's leave that for now, shall we?

Before getting dressed in the mornings, I drink tea with a dash of milk and two sugars out of my RSPB mug. Then I have two slices of wholemeal toast with lemon marmalade and a second mug of tea.

After breakfast this morning, I go out to the phone box to call the doctor's. There aren't so many public phones around these days, so it's a bit of a walk.

I'm sorry, says the receptionist, we can only do appointments between eight-thirty and nine-thirty. It's after ten now.

What am I going to do? I've run out of medication.

I'm sorry, she says again. You'll have to ring back tomorrow morning.

Are you the new lady? The one with red hair? The old receptionist wouldn't make things so difficult.

Ring up tomorrow. She puts the phone down.

HE JOINS A swarm of swallows on their farewell tour of the Home Counties prior to moving south for the winter. He feels snug in the middle of the party as they fly over their favourite haunts. Every so often one of them breaks away from the group and swoops down to perch momentarily on a selected rooftop.

What's going on?

The swallows flanking him cock their heads and giggle. Didn't you know? We've taken on the job of shitting on the homes of all the red-haired receptionists in the world.

I'M HAVING TROUBLE sleeping at night. Strange noises come from next door, as if the neighbours are building a machine to send microwaves through the wall. I don't feel safe enough to sleep until it gets light and then I don't wake up again until nearly noon. Too late to phone the GP's surgery.

After breakfast – or maybe I should call it lunch – I collect my post from the doormat. There is only a leaflet from the supermarket advertising this month's promotions. I take it to the dining table and study it carefully. There's a special offer on aluminium foil. It must be a sign. I go straight out and buy ten rolls for the price of eight. I spend the next couple of days making my place safe. I roll out the foil and stick the sheets onto my bedroom walls like wallpaper. That should stop the microwaves coming through from next door.

I'm so busy I don't notice the time, and maybe I forget to go to bed, I'm not sure. At some point someone, probably my neighbour, calls through the letterbox, Stop that banging. Which is a bit much, given his behaviour, don't you think?

SPARROWHAWK, GOSHAWK, HONEY buzzard, kestrel.

Sea eagle, red kite, black-shouldered kite, osprey.

Golden eagle, griffon vulture, bearded vulture, falcon.

Toucan, pelican, Peter Pan, Superman.
Can he fly? Corsican.

THE NOISES FROM next door have multiplied. Banging and shouting at odd times in the night. In the daytime, a strange whirring sound, like machinery. People whispering, plotting. The foil gives me some protection, but for how long? Can it hold out until the birds come?

Perhaps I should make a fire in the garden to attract their attention. But it isn't safe outside. Can't trust anyone. Not even you. At least I had the sense not to tell you my name.

I've no more bread, so I make do with marmalade and crackers for breakfast. If they run out, I'm sure the birds will forgive me if I break into the nuts and seeds I've stored up for winter.

At night, I hear the birds coming.

COME, SAY THE sunbirds, we will take you to visit our mother, Aurora.

He soars through the atmosphere, rising higher than he ever dreamt possible. Fireworks spangle into Technicolor above his head. It's beautiful, he says. I could stay here for ever.

You must fly higher, say the sunbirds. Our mother is waiting.

As he rises, heat cuddles his soul like his grandmother's kitchen on baking day. Below, the earth is as dull as an old tennis ball. People can't hurt him when they're reduced to the size of fleas.

To his right, a rocket bursts into stars, peppering his flying arm with flaming saltpetre. Ouch, he says.

The sunbirds laugh. Wimp!

High above, Aurora sits on her throne, combing her golden hair. Come children, she calls.

Swaddled by the heat, he can barely move his wings.

Mother, he's getting tired, say the sunbirds.

Fire infiltrates his body with every breath. Hot stings his eyes. He cannot go on.

Aurora lets down a braid of her hair. Catch hold, she says, and I will pull you up to our home.

The golden rope swings before his eyes. Inebriated with heat, he reaches out, misses. Reaches out. Misses.

Clumpo! Mongol! Idiot!

Shhh, says their mother. You should respect our guest.

Summoning his last atom of earthly cool, he fixes his gaze on his lifeline to the sun and reaches out once more. He catches it with his right, squeezes tight. He wrinkles his nose at the smell of smouldering flesh as he feels himself pulled heavenwards.

Hold tight, calls Aurora.

The pain shoots into his armpit. Gasping, he lets go of the hair-rope and goes falling, tumbling, somersaulting, crashing. Down to earth.

Never mind, Aurora tells her children. I'll find you a better playmate.

A POLICEMAN STANDS in my bedroom along with one of the doctors from the surgery.

Sorry about your front door, he says.

How did you know about the microwaves? I ask. How did you know to come?

Your neighbours were concerned about the noise. And they thought they could smell fire. Let me see your hand.

Did the birds say when they'd be coming?

Not to me, says the doctor. But why not come to the hospital? There are lots of birds around there.

GROUNDED NOW, HIS arms ache with nostalgia. Down here among the regular people, his movements are clumsy, like an

astronaut adapting to gravity all over again. But it doesn't matter.
This is only a resting point on his migration route to the sun.

Be patient, the voices tell him, you will rise again.