**Winter Break**

A short story by Hilary Mantel (A couple cover up a murder for selfish reasons)

Photograph: David Kilpatrick/Alamy

By the time they arrived at their destination, they could no longer recognize their own name. The taxi driver stabbed the air with his placard while they stood gawping up and down the line, until Phil pointed and said: "That's us." Little peaks had grown over the "Ts" in their surname, and the dot on the "i' had drifted away like an island. She rubbed her cheek, numbed by the draught from the air vent above her seat; the rest of her felt creased and gritty, and while Phil bustled towards the man, waving, she picked the cloth of her T-shirt away from the small of her back, and shuffled after him. We dress for the weather we want, as if to bully it, even though we've seen the forecast.

The driver laid a hairy, proprietorial hand on their baggage trolley. He was a squat man with the regulation moustache, and he wore a twill zipped jacket with a tartan lining peeping from under it; as if to say, forget your sunshine illusions. The plane was late and it was already dark. He flung open a rear door for her and humped their bags into the back of his estate car. "Long way," was all he said.

"Yes, but pre-paid," Phil said.

The driver plumped down in his seat with a leathery creak. When he slammed his door the whole vehicle shuddered. The front headrests had been wrenched off, so when he swiveled his body to reverse he threw his arm across both seatbacks and stared past her unseeing, an inch from her face, while she examined his nostril hair by the giddy flash of the car park's lights. "Sit back, darling," Phil told her. "Seatbelt on. Away we go."

How suited he would have been to fatherhood. Whoops-a-daisy. There, there. No harm done.

But Phil thought otherwise. Always had. He preferred to be able to take a winter break during the school term, when hotel rates were lower. For years now he had passed her newspapers, folded to those reports that tell you how children cost a million pounds before they're 18. "When you see it set out like that," he'd say, "it's frightening. People think they'll get away with hand-me-downs. Half-portions. It doesn't work like that."

"But our child wouldn't have a drug addiction," she'd say. "Not on that scale. It wouldn't be bright enough for Eton. It could go down the road to Hillside Comp. Although, I hear they have head lice."

"And you wouldn't want to deal with that, would you?" he said: a man laying down his ace.

They inched through the town, the pavements jostling, the cheap bars flashing their signs, and Phil said, as she knew he would, "I think we made the right decision." A journey of an hour lay ahead, and they speeded up through the sprawling outskirts; the road began to climb. When she was sure that the driver did not want conversation she eased herself back in her seat. There were two types of taxi man: the garrulous ones with a niece in Dagenham, who wanted to talk right the way out to the far coast and the national park, and the ones who needed every grunt racked out of them, who wouldn't tell you where their niece lived if they were under torture. She made one or two tourist remarks: how had the weather been? "Raining. Now I smoke," the man said. He thrust a cigarette right from the packet into his mouth, juggling a lighter and at one point taking his hands from the wheel entirely. He drove very fast, treating each swerve in the road as a personal insult, fuming at any hold up. She could feel Phil's opinions banking up behind his teeth: now that won't do the gearbox any good, will it? At first, a few cars edged past them, creeping down to the lights of the town. Then the traffic thinned and petered out. As the road narrowed, black and silent hills fell away behind them. Phil began to tell her about the flora and fauna of the high maquis.

She had to imagine the fragrance of herbs crushed underfoot. The car windows were sealed against the still, cool night, and she turned her head deliberately away from her husband and misted the glass with her breath. The fauna was mostly goats. They tumbled down the hillsides, stones cascading after them, and leapt across the path of the car, kids running at their heels. They were patched and parti-colored, fleet and heedless. Sometimes an eye gleamed furtive in a headlight. She twitched at the seatbelt, which was sawing into her throat. She closed her eyes.

At Heathrow Phil had been a pain in the security queue. When the young man in front of them bent to pick laboriously at the laces of his hiking boots, Phil said loudly: "He knows he has to take his shoes off. But he couldn't just have slip-ons, like the rest of us."

"Phil," she whispered, "it's because they're heavy. He wants to wear his boots so they don't count as baggage."

"I call it selfish. Here's the queue banking up. He knows what's going to happen."

The hiker glanced up from the tail of his eye. "Sorry, mate."

"One day you'll get your head punched in," she said.

"We'll see, shall we?" Phil said: singing it, like a child in a playground game.

Once, a year or two into their marriage, he had confessed to her that he found the presence of small children unbearably agitating: the unmodulated noise, the strewn plastic toys, the inarticulate demands that you provide something, fix something, though you didn't know what it was.

"On the contrary," she said. "They point. They shout, 'Juice'."

He nodded miserably. "A lifetime of that," he said. "It would get to you. It would feel like a lifetime."

Anyway, it was becoming academic now. She had reached that stage in her fertile life when genetic strings got knotted and chromosomes went whizzing around and reattaching themselves. "Trisomies," he said. "Syndromes. Metabolic deficiencies. I wouldn't put you through that."

She sighed. Rubbed her bare arms. Phil leaned forward. Cleared his throat, spoke to the driver. "My wife is chilly."

"Wear the cardigan," said the driver. He slotted another cigarette into his mouth. The road now ascended in a series of violent bends, and at each of them he wrenched the wheel, throwing the car's back-end out towards the ditches.

"How long?" she asked. "About?"

"Half-hour." If he could have concluded the statement by spitting, she felt he would.

"Still in time for dinner," Phil said encouragingly. He rubbed her arms for her, as if to give encouragement. She laughed shakily. "You make them wobble," she said.

"Nonsense. There's no flesh on you."

There was a cloudy half-moon, a long scoop of fallen land to their right, a bristling tree line above them, and as he cupped her elbow, caressing it, there was once more a skid and slide, a rock-shower rattling inconsequentially to the road before them. Phil was just saying: "It'll only take me two minutes to unpack." He was beginning to explain to her his system for travelling light. But the driver grunted, wrenched the wheel, stabbed the brakes and brought them lurching to a halt. She shot forward, jarring her wrist on the seat in front. The seatbelt pulled her back. They had felt the impact but seen nothing. The driver swung open his door and ducked out into the night. "Kid," Phil whispered.

Gone under? The driver was pulling something from between the front wheels. He was bent double and they could see his bottom rise in the air, with the frill of tartan at his waist. Inside the body of the car they sat very still, as if not to draw attention to the incident. They did not look at each other, but watched as the driver straightened up, rubbed the small of his back, then walked around and lifted the tailgate, pulling out something dark, like a tarpaulin. The chill of the night hit them between their shoulder blades, and fractionally they shrank together. Phil took her hand. She twitched it away: not petulant, but because she felt she needed to concentrate. The driver appeared in silhouette before them, lit by their own headlights. He turned his head and glanced up and down the empty road. He had something in his hand, a rock. He stooped. Thud, thud, thud. She tensed. She wanted to cry out. Thud, thud, thud. The man straightened up. There was a bundle in his arms. Tomorrow's dinner, she thought. Seethed in onion and tomato sauce. She didn't know why the word 'seethed' came to her. She remembered a sign down in the town: The Sophocles School of Motoring. "Call no man happy . . ." The driver posted the bundle into the back of the car, by their luggage. The tailgate slammed.

Recycling, she thought. Phil would say "Very laudable". If he spoke. But it seemed he had decided not to. She understood that they wouldn't, either of them, mention this dire start to their winter break. She cradled her wrist. Gently, gently. A movement of anxiety. A washing. Massaging the minute pain away. I shall go on hearing it, she thought, at least for the rest of this week: thud, thud, thud. We might make a joke of it, perhaps. How we froze. How we let him get on with it, what else could we . . . because you don't get vets patrolling the mountains by night. Something rose into her throat, that she wanted to articulate: tickled her hard palate, fell away again.

The porter said: "Welcome to the Royal Athena Sun." Light spilled from a marble interior, and near at hand some cold broken columns were spot-lit, the light shifting from blue to green and back again. That will be the "archaeological feature" as promised, she thought. Another time she would have grinned at the exuberant vulgarity. But the clammy air, the incident . . . she inched out of the car and straightened up, unsmiling, her hand resting on the taxi's roof. The driver nudged past her without a word. He lifted the tailgate. But the porter, hovering helpful, was behind him. He reached for their bags with both hands. The driver moved swiftly, blocking him, and to her own amazement she jumped forward, "No!" and so did Phil, "No!"

"I mean," Phil said. "It's only two bags." As if to prove the lightness of the load, he had gripped one of the bags in his own fist, and he gave it a joyous twirl. "I believe in – " he said. But the phrase "travelling light" eluded him. "Not much stuff," he said.

"Okay, sir." The porter shrugged. Stepped back. She rehearsed it in her mind, as if telling it to a friend, much later: you see, we were made complicit. But the taxi driver didn't do anything wrong, of course. Just something efficient.

And her imaginary friend agreed: still, instinctively you would feel, you would feel there was something to hide.

"I'm ready for a drink," Phil said. He was yearning for the scene beyond the plate glass: brandy sours, clanking ice-cubes in the shape of fish, clicking high heels on terracotta tiles, wrought iron scrollwork, hotel linen, soft pillow. Call no man happy. Call no man happy until he has gone down to his grave in peace. Or at least to his junior suite: and can rub out today and wake tomorrow hungry. The taxi driver leaned into the car to scoop out the second bag. As he did, he nudged aside the tarpaulin, and what she glimpsed – and in the same moment, refused to see – was not a cloven hoof, but the grubby hand of a human child.