

ði 'jʌn'vɛɪst 'kɒnsɒnənt

THE UNVOICED CONSONANT



*A story delivered carefully,
in the best English they can manage,
by five language teachers,
a student who yearns,
and a pigeon who can't find her way home.*

Clare Mendes



© Clare Mendes 2015

All Rights Reserved

www.claremendes.com

BALMY WEATHER



'b a: m i: 'w e v ð

I

**If I hadn't forgotten to enter the security code,
the bullet-proof window would of shot up like it was supposed to of.**

*3rd conditional + modal verb – 'would' + verb 'to have' + past participle of verb
(3rd form) + unfinished clause ending with two particles.*

†Commonly used to express regret in relation to a past event



Growing up in the East End, there's all sorts of fings you can't possibly predict. Like who's going to nick your telly the next time you leave the front door open for too long, or who's going to take off wif your rubbish bins when you forget to bring them in. Who's going to be the next bozo to scribble *Sick Bastard* on the wall of Jock's Guns 'n' Thingz, importer of antique bongz and weaponry you can't actually use though I did hear there were a sub-branch just beind Jock's Flowers where you could pick up an old-school shotty just for having round the house. But nobody could of predicted that Jock's muvver would get two years for illegally importing a Mexican cactus wif 200 grams of cocaine hidden in its root system, just like you couldn't of predicted that risotto night at the Elephant & Wheelbarrow would take off like it's done. However there's one fing you can predict when you grow up wif kids who've got names like Kennef and Raymond and Briggsie, in 1985, who've got an old man in the clink and a muvver who's on the turps or just addicted to iced donuts and some uncle in the background who's meant to be taking the place of farver but he's actually giving muvver a bit of afternoon delight when he's not rummaging frough his nephew's room for stuff he can hock, and that's this: The life you got is the life you got.

Personally, I'm not unhappy wif the straw I pulled. It's not as long as Ronald Polson's, two doors up - farver carked it during an Arsenal match but muvver's an attractive lesbian convert who hooked up wif a lecturer named Trixie from the University of East London when Ronald were doing his A-levels, Trixie paid for him

to have Maf's tutoring every Saturday while we was having a lie-in, din she, and these days Ronald's a stockbroker on 200k a year – but it's definitely longer than the twig they handed Johnny Greeves down on the corner. No one in that house had worked since the sixties, and I don't know how Johnny fought he were going to buck this trend by dropping out of school at fifteen, getting Sharon Crocker knocked up behind the pub and bringing her back to live in that room wif all the stereos in it. But perhaps he didn't fink. The Parsley boys next door, they got given a pack of toofpicks. The only one who hasn't done time for possession is Gordon, who's smart enough to do is deals over in Mile End and he had fertility problems for a long time as well, meaning that him and Patsy didn't have their first baby till they was twenty-two. They've had anuvver five since then, and there's one of them who isn't on Ritalin and pronounces *house* "hice". In Tower Hamlets, bofe these fings are viewed as glimmers of hope.

Our family's always been somefink of a glimmer. We moved into our council house on Marigold Street in 1971, same year as the Parsleys, but where they've got old bean bags on their front porch and a row of dead geraniums sticking out of beer bottles, we've got ceramic window boxes and a tub full of sweet pea. Out back, we've resisted the temptation to leave the Ford Escort we trashed back in 1989 buried up to its hubcaps amongst the radishes and have instead gone for a traditional English cottage garden – primroses and violets and crocusses, the sort of fink Mrs Parsley should have on display round her place instead of them photos of Mr Parsley's fighting cock tearing some uvver rooster apart at the froat. But a cottage garden takes time to maintain, and I fink Mrs Parsley quite likes dressing up of a Sunday and taking the 242 out to Beckton to watch Big Rory take on the reigning champion and then frow him his sheep's brain afterwards. Our muvver prefers the quieter life, and has spent the best part of the last firty years shopping each morning, gardening each afternoon and cooking our farver's lamb's fry wif silver beet exactly the way he likes it. On Wednesdays we have pudding, Fridays are battered cod and every day our farver leaves the house at half eight to go to his job at Spitalfields Men's Quality Apparel. He had a brick frown at him once. The day he drove home in his new Morris, we got a deaf freat. 'We'll be moving out to Essex one of these days. You're allowed to make somefink of yourself in Essex,' he promised us. But we're staying in Tower Hamlets, it seems.

In 1998, before the developers started moving in, him and Mum took the plunge and bought our council house. They still haven't done a lot wif it. They've

been planning for years to turn Mum's sewing room into a home cinema, complete wif popcorn bar, but the Singer's still sitting over by the window. Petra's old room's become the guest room, however, where people like Uncle Harry stay when they come down to London for the Christmas lights, but they're sitting tight on mine. I expect they're waiting to see if I've gone for good or if I'm just taking a holiday. You'd have to say that my parents seem reasonably content wif the straws they pulled. My muvver's descended from a long line of tripe boilers and my farver's grandparents grew up in the same street as Jack the Ripper. Between them, they've waded frough decades of muck and blood and dysentery to get to 5b Marigold Street. Dorrie and George Muggleton are a shining example of what you can achieve in Tower Hamlets if you're prepared to stick to a job, not go to the pub before 11am and not look interested when skinny white blokes wif rasta caps take you aside on Folgate Street to say they've got a lovely new Blaupunkt flatscreen going at a cracker price and do you want it and does it matter that the serial number's been scratched off the back. In a way, if you consider it in the light of an A to B trip, my parents going from a Dorset Street mutilation to a Marigold Street home cinema makes them almost as successful as Petra, given that her A point, wif its Wednesday puddings and Friday fish, was so civilised for these parts that it naturally reduced the travelling time required to arrive at B.

Sharon Crocker, who left Johnny in 2005 and moved back in wif her muvver, who didn't agree wif Nora Greeves that her pitbulls should of been put down after what they done to Johnny (especially given that he were passed out on the settee at the time), would tell you that Petra's bypassed B and gone straight to Z. If she still had the use of her bottom lip. But that's how impressed she is wif Petra, and most of the girls round here fink the same. 'She went and done what we bleeding wish we had, ain't she,' they grimace. You naturally grimace a lot when you grow up behind the Stokes & Son Umbrella Factory, and it's got worse for all of us since Tyre Power got razed and the sun started shining frough. 'I mean, what little girl don't grow up dreaming of being a TV star, cameras flashing, people queuing up for a handout – I mean, an autograph?' The grimace changes to an accusing stare, which would generally happen anyway after a couple of seconds. 'You sure the two of you's really twins, Edgar?'

But it's like I say. The life you got is the life you got.

Really, I done orright for myself. I've never been in the slammer. I never even went to that kids' slammer, that big multi-coloured multi-purpose facility out back of the Brick Lane Markets where they teach you life skills during the day and slap you round at night. I never got expelled from school, I never broke no windows, I never tried to hit on Miss Wilkins, even though some of the boys said she quite liked it when you gave her a little squeeze during Remedial Mafs. I always turned up to Remedial Mafs, I went to all my classes; and the day somebody set fire to the science lab I were one of two students hand-picked to go in and bring out the mice. 'We know you won't hurt them like anuvver boy might,' said the headmaster, Mr Dickers, blood streaming from his forehead. 'After all, you keep pigeons.'

I keep pigeons. Homing pigeons, to be exact – except I've never had much luck getting them back home. Since 1990 I've bought and lost around free dozen. I dunno what I'm doing wrong, or neglecting to do. Ringo, he were king of the roost and showing real potential till I sent him off to school one morning wif a message for Mr Suresh the sports teacher. *I lost your cricket ball*, it read – I never fought I'd lose my little black pigeon as well. I lost Paul the same week, John the monf after that and George in the spring, I recall, when I sent him down the street wif a warning for Johnny Greeves: *Stay away from my Mum's roses* – they bofe did. After that I tried out some females, making sure to launch them from exactly the same place each time just like the *Pigeon Breeders' Guide* said to do; Victoria eventually come back from her trip to the park, slightly wild-eyed and wif her capsule missing, but Posh and Spice were never to be seen again. They were sensitive, high-strung types, so I'm finking they may have been disoriented by some small change to the earf's magnetic field as can happen wif birds. Wif the boys it could of been a sudden odour, a glitch in the lighting, or the fact that I sent them all out round the same time as they was doing them roadworks down in Bishops Square. Pigeons rely on visual landmarks, and can be sensitive to changes in their local environment – replacing that Victorian era fire hydrant wif a flashing, self-automated toilet were never going to be helpful for any of them, and after David Beckham were found deceased on a compost heap in Lamb Street, when he were supposed to of been delivering an anonymous message to Eric Walters who'd been bullying me down on Brushfield Street, I decided that this were a message for me. After a few more losses, I scaled back my pigeon operations, and since 2002 it's really just been Cher Ami who's gone out for a daily fly. I fink he only comes back because he's hungry. I don't ever send him wif a message.

I did have one uvver pigeon who always come back home, and that were Marfa. Named in honour of the famous passenger pigeon Marfa, who died at the Cincinatti Zoo – if you go to the Smifsonian Institute you can see her body on display, apparently she still looks brilliant. Died in 1914 at the age of twenty-nine, did Cincinatti Marfa – that’s twenty-seven years longer than any of the Parsley cocks, and I’m sorry to say that my own Marfa were only wif us for five before she flew smack bang into the kitchen window. That’s the first and last time I use an electronic bird launcher. Her lifetime mate Kevin, he were devastated and so were I. She weren’t the sharpest of birds, Marfa, but she knew how to go out and come back. The Love Bird, I called her, cos I give her all my romantic messages to deliver; she were my Cupid, at a time when I didn’t have the confidence or clear skin to be Cupid myself. I’d fink of a girl I liked, write my ode, tuck it into a capsule and strap it to her leg. Then I’d launch her, usually from the top of the clothesline though on a wet day she liked to take off from inside the incinerator lid provided it weren’t alight. Off she’d soar, high and majestic, arcing west at the pub so she didn’t fly into the steeple of St Efel’s. Wifin the half hour she’d always be back, fevvers fluffed up wif pride and her message capsule swinging open and empty. She did exactly what a homing pigeon is meant to do.

You’re super, I wrote to Natalie Moorcroft. *Be my Valentine*, I said to Belinda Jones. *Fancy the pictures some time?* I asked Aliyah Bhat. Like I said, they were words of love, or maybe just desperation – but even when I launched Marfa from behind Afshan’s house, having pointed out the second floor window ledge she were to land on, she were still able to fly unassisted, mission accomplished, all the way back to Marigold Street. She were a market special, Marfa were, just two quid on account of having a flaking left toe, so I’ve never understood why she delivered messages and come straight back when the uvvers apparently couldn’t manage eiver. I treated them all the same way, feeding them the same oats and grit, keeping their nest boxes clean and dry. I guess it’s not every pigeon who’s prepared to cut short a visit to the bins out back of the chippy to deliver a love letter. There’ll be those who need to keep flying. The world’s a big place when you’ve got wings.

At the moment I’ve got six pigeons. Cher Ami you already know about – I named him after the original Cher Ami, an amazing bird who, in case you didn’t know, managed to save the troops of the Lost Battalion, October 1918, by carrying a message to them despite being pounded wif shrapnel by the French along the way.

The uvver five are mostly young fings who just fly from the coop to the roof and back again. Mum did promise to keep them fed and watered; maybe she won't look after them the way I done, but I couldn't stay living in that house. Every time I went into the back yard I'd look up and see the Sun Credit Union, at least that wevver vane that sits up top of it; I'd watch it spin this way and that, I'd fink of Cheerful Charlie and what he done, and next fink I'd be taking it out on the birds. When you find yourself telling a blind, fevverless little squab that he's a piss-weak sonofabitch who should move his plates of fucking meat and I mean now Jimmy, it's probably time to get out of London.

I've been here a week now and I'm quite enjoying it. The wevver's a bit on the balmy side and the food has a way of repeating on you, but nobody speaks English so they don't ask too many questions. I've got diarrhoea. I've got a new career.

Actually, you couldn't of predicted none of this.



Forty-four years old and I'm living in this crowded city, an English teacher. Nobody could have predicted this. I'm a gardener, for Christsake. I've spent the last twenty years working with Australian native flora, planting it, pruning it, talking to it. Now I find myself talking to mature-age students about verb tenses. I tell them they can't mix them, and why, and how there's this whole other group of irregular verbs that, when you use them in the second and third form, take on different endings. I teach them about adjectives, and adjective phrases and adverbial clauses; I explain the difference between countable nouns and uncountable nouns, between relative pronouns and relative clauses. When they use an auxiliary in the wrong place, I correct them.

What any of this has to do with gardening, I can't say. Do I miss it? Yes. No. Every time I walk through my local park, I think about what I would've done with the space if they'd given it to me. That big bed jammed up with begonias, I'd be pulling them out and putting in a mix of tropicals. Not everything grows in soil like this, but impatiens and heliconias tend to do well. That tatty bridge that goes across the big lake, you could dress it up with bougeanvillea, pink and orange, a spray of white; bougeanvillea flourishes in a balmy, humid climate like this, and when your flowers

are gone you've got a nice mass of shiny leaves to look at. They've planted a collection of iris hybrids around the smaller lake, which is okay, I suppose, they're easy enough to maintain; but this is the city of the water lily, and I've always said you should plant whatever grows naturally in a place. Take out the irises and let the lilies do the talking. They've got a lot to say. I installed a fishpond a few years back and the lady wanted a dozen or so lilies down the shady end, plus some helleborus, for Christ's sake, in thirty-five degree heat – *They won't take*, I told her, and we put in some bracteantha instead. You'd know them as strawflowers. This was when the drought was in full swing and anything that wasn't a banksia was keeling over in the heat. I finished it off with a border of mesembryanthemum, which survive anywhere, and she was happy with that. In the end, you can only work with the environment you've got. Forcing a plant to adapt to soil with a pH level that's too low, or a silt level that's too high, it's like entering a motorbike in a car show and expecting it to win. It's like putting a landscape gardener in an English language school and expecting him to know how to teach.

Somehow, you do. The expectations aren't high. You can do naturally what your students wish they could – you can string any combination of words together, clauses, compound nouns, a few phrasal verbs and the odd collocation or two, and make it make sense. You don't even have to try. The hard work is in trying to explain why you did what you did, but teaching's not a test – you're not on trial. Anything you can teach these students, shopkeepers and postal workers, housewives and engineers, it'll be more than they knew before. It was my birthday last week and some of them found out and chipped in for a tie. It's navy blue, with a gold kangaroo at the bottom. A customer would never do that, though sometimes you'd get invited in for a beer. The Douglasses, whose back yard I practically excavated, they used to send me home at the end of each week with a fresh leg of lamb for Mum, like we didn't have enough of our own damn sheep. But most of them had stopped giving birth by that stage. Well, they didn't have anything to graze on. We'd wash down that lamb with the apple cider the Carmichaels had given us, and they're all dead now, wiped out in the same afternoon, but I can still taste that lamb and that cider.

Tastebuds are funny, the way they can make a memory spring back. One mouthful of sausage and I'm on the banks of the Campaspe, dangling a line as the Second Test drones out of the car stereo. Pineapple always takes me back to Redland Bay, Queensland, the road trip I did in 1999 with Paul Halloran and Steve Lichfield;

oranges remind me of little league footy training, a shot of bourbon and I'm in the pool comp at the Mountain Inn, and as soon as I smell a loaf of bread, I'm back at the Stony Creek Bakery. Deanne Power, skin-tight Levis, baker's hat slipping off her head. I wonder what happened to her. I know she got out in time – most of them up on Bailey's Road did – but beyond that is anyone's guess. She'd been divorced from Jason for a few years by then. Maybe she moved to the city afterwards, like a lot of the women with young kids did. There was nothing left for them in Stony Creek.

It's nice out tonight. I generally go straight home after work, straight home and that's where I stay; it's a pattern that hasn't changed since I arrived in this city but tonight, for the first time in a long time, I'm meeting someone for a beer. A potential flatmate, a bloke named Edgar Muggleton. There's some new teachers starting and he's one of them. He needs somewhere to live - I've got a spare room. Well, I've been on my own since I arrived. It used to suit me, lately it doesn't. It gets bloody quiet in that apartment. If you sit there for long enough, you start to hear things – feet thumping, doors shutting, people crying, screaming. The TV only drowns out so much. What I need is an actual, living person sitting in that spare chair. I mean, it's only human to want some company from time to time isn't it? I don't think anyone would begrudge me that.

He arrives at seven on the dot, a skinny bloke with sloping shoulders, a pot belly and blond hair that's going thin on top. He wears it combed back, the way my old man did in the seventies. He smiles, all crooked teeth and shining blue eyes. 'It's Toby, innit? How's everyfink, then? You're not what I expected. You sounded about sixty on the phone.'

For some reason, with all that's happened, I still look young. I shake his hand – it's small and warm, like him. 'You sounded like an extra from "The Bill", Ed. But I'm still prepared to show you the room.'

'I'm very glad to hear it. By the way, the name's Edgar. You can call me Ed if you want to, but I might not turn around.' Growing up, he explains, the head of the local Hells Angels chapter was named Ed. This never posed a problem till the day a rock was thrown through his kitchen window with a death threat attached to it – from that day on he was Edgar, and he likes the fact that he was named after a royal corgi. Most of his friends were named after London crime figures or characters from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, in some cases both. When Edgar talks, he sounds like Reg from Sunhill. When his meal comes out, he asks if they can do a fried egg on top.

He's had the runs all day, he says. Before his trip to Koh Samui, on the way here, he'd never been out of the UK. He's never taught English.

He's never eaten fried pipis, either. He gulps down some tea and orders another pot. Then he orders a beer. He starts to relax. He tells me a bit about his life to date, about his family, his friends, the pub where he plays darts of a Thursday. Then he's waiting politely, the customer who's about to hand over ten grand to a bloke with no qualifications in landscaping – really I had none, just an eye for what might work – before the question comes. As I knew it would. 'So what was you doing before you come over here then, Toby?'

Like a customer, he'll believe whatever I say. I take a sip of beer. 'For a job, you mean? I was a photographer. Mundane stuff mostly – you know, portraits, family shots. Weddings.' But already I can feel the numbness spreading. 'So how long were you working at the bank?'

Edgar rubs at a mosquito bite. 'Long enough. That were pretty mundane as well, weren't it? In the end I took a package.' He glances at my right arm. 'Nice scar you've got there. What did you do – accidentally leave out the best man?'

I smile. I pull down my sleeve, but it's never far enough.

If Edgar Muggleton's going to teach English in a foreign country, the first rule he needs to learn is this: The past stays in the past. Don't ask a teacher what they did before, and don't tell them what you did. This city, with its crowded streets and its constant traffic, with its smells and its dust and its sticky heat that means from one hour to the next you're suffocating in your own sweat, this city actually frees you. For now, anyway. After years of darkness you can come here and pretend that it didn't happen, whatever you did, did wrong; and with a stamp of your passport your past is wiped clean and you get to live in the present. You're not sure how long they'll give you. You just know that you need to stay in this infinite, split-second moment, because to look back is as scary as all hell and there's not a damn thing in front of you. You forfeited your rights to a future.

So you keep on breathing, you keep on living, you keep your eyes firmly on the present. And because the present is all you've got, even though you're not entitled to ask for much, and because at the end of the day you're still a human being with a human being's needs, to some extent you try to make it work – there's this tiny part of you that, despite everything that's happened, still wants to enjoy the present, to celebrate it. Crazy, and perhaps unjustly, you still want to make the present perfect



which happens to be one of my favourite verb tenses. Someone else partial to it is William, as can be seen in –

*Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again*

- *have made, basked, plunged*, these are classic Present Perfect constructions – Present Perfect Simple, if we are being precise, which we are and I am – and they are further evidence (as though we needed any!) of William's supreme contentment with his life and his litany of achievements up until now, in the years post-death. Indeed, this is one reason why we use the Present Perfect – to pay understated yet certain tribute to our achievements right up to this moment, and a minute beyond this moment, which would explain why Pope seldom uses it. Bereft of vision, Pope. Despite my repeated suggestions to the contrary, he continues to write largely in the Present Simple tense, as omniscient as the God he surely believes himself to be; though he does enjoy dabbling with the Past Simple as well, penning his wisdom so matter-of-factly that one becomes fearful of challenging any inaccuracies – because Alexander Pope is the only deceased poet in the Council with a grasp on history, didn't you know? Blake didn't; and his gentle inquiry in relation to the mythical origins of Apollo the Sunday before last (Pope was adamant that he was, in fact, an Italian nobleman who had moved to Exeter for the mild summers), teamed with a firmer rebuke in relation to Pope's over-use of the apostrophe (which, in my capacity as his editor, had also been playing on my nerves for some time), led to a dramatic showdown in the parlour after dinner, the two of them exchanging blow after blow beneath the crystal chandelier until Pope declared himself too weak to fight. He retired to his room, where he began penning some ghastly verse entitled *Nero's Terraces*. It won't be published, of course, but I understand it's keeping him busy and away from the snuff box ...

To buy

THE UNVOICED CONSONANT

visit

www.claremendes.com

Clare Mendes



© Clare Mendes 2015

All Rights Reserved

www.claremendes.com