



A Day in the Life of a Writer

Mirza Waheed

MY DAY IS OFTEN bookended by two school runs.

It took me around a year to internalise that as a stay-at-home dad, I do not have the day to myself. When I left my day job at the BBC a decade ago, the sudden sense of liberation I felt may have deceived me into thinking *I have long days of reading and writing in front of me, all the time in the world*. I'd drop my son at his nursery, then go to a nearby library and fiddle with the laptop until something happened, a passage took off, or a section gave the appearance of narrative momentum. We all know the routine, good days and bad days. I managed alright, producing a second novel while being an alright parent to our firstborn. I must note that my wife, at full-time work five days a week, did everything to support my habit. It was fine, I was writing full-time, loving it, sometimes even going to Tuscany on a writing residency.

All that changed, or perhaps crashed might be a better word, when the second child arrived a few years later. Now we had a school-going child, and an infant in the pram. They had different lives, different points of view, and separate, often manic, demands. Just when you started to look at that page, someone needed a diaper change. As soon as you got into a rhythm later in the day, or told yourself you're in *the zone*, another one cried 'I want snacks, dad!' Words such as 'concentration' and 'focus' acquired new meanings.

There was no such thing as uninterrupted time — even when the children weren't at home, the mind was sometimes suddenly hijacked by thoughts



of milk, bananas, Weetabix, or simply, *Oh, God, is that the 'change of clothes' staring at me from the kitchen table?*

But the human mind is an adaptable, somehow upgradable processor. It gets rewired, or at least that's what you tell yourself to work with what's available. Yes, it's not perfect, far from ideal conditions etcetera, etcetera, the quiet den where no one dares enter is a complete myth; but you learn, retrain yourself, even if it all feels desperate, full of existential dread or dispiriting tedium. Now, you don't come back home straight from the nursery or the school run, you take a round of the park, to let fresh air wash over you. You walk and walk, and at some point, you find yourself thinking about that secondary character in your work in progress: What might she think of her absentee father during her morning walks?

Let me go back to the two bookends of the writing day. Now you know you have until 3 pm to do what you do, and you know it's not even half a day when you factor in your rituals, the necessary procrastination things, the Internet ablutions, someone's said something outrageous on the social, and so on... At last, you shut yourself and type away furiously or lazily — you know you're up against a deadline. Also, you don't want to forget to pick them up. Of course, on occasion you ring up another parent, panting, 'Could you please... I'm on the way, just a tiny bit late.'

At night, you're exhausted from all the attempts at trying to work. You crash but a part of the brain is at work on the story. You are revising some or all of what you somehow managed to write during the day.