

LAUREN CHILD

– Introduction –

Children are not uncomplicated creatures and childhood does not cocoon from the anxieties of the world. If anything, it amplifies them, for as children we have only fragments of information and little power to put things right.

From a very tiny age, my older sister worried *constantly* that my parents were getting things ‘wrong’. She – *rightly*, in my young opinion – did not keep these concerns to herself. On one occasion my sister noticed that the tax disc had unglued itself from the windscreen of our car and she became convinced that my mother’s failure to display it would lead to our parents’ imprisonment.

‘Who will look after us then?’ she furiously sobbed.

‘That won’t happen,’ my mother tried to calm.

‘You will be arrested by the police,’ my sister wailed.

I absolutely took her side. Her certainty was very convincing and I could tell she properly understood exactly how these things played out. She was so hysterical that my mother had to pull over and stick the disc to the windscreen with the only thing to hand: Green Shield Stamps. As *anyone* who grew up in the

seventies would know, Green Shield Stamps (reward tokens for shopping) were valuable things – collect enough and you might be able to cash them in for a set of coffee glasses – nothing my family would ever find a use for but nevertheless, desirable to own. Despite my mother’s protestations that my sister was getting ‘needlessly worked up’, she sacrificed the stamps. Confronted by the inconsolable anxiety of my sister, there was no alternative. And after all, you are far more likely to be arrested for wanton and furious driving if you have a hysterical six-year-old screaming at you.

I rarely voiced my concerns about my mother and father’s parental ineptitude – I didn’t need to, my sister had that covered – I had wider worries. There was rabies for instance, a disease which caused dogs to foam at the mouth and run around looking for people to bite and infect. The rabid people would in turn foam at the mouth and run around looking for *other* people to bite, until everyone was infected and then dead. I think I had pieced together this idea from snippets I had heard on the (always on) radio and mixed them in with gory facts about the bubonic plague. But it was the proposed Channel Tunnel which tipped me over the edge; as I understood it, France (and indeed everywhere else in the world) was teeming with rabid dogs – surely the reason we banned all foreign pets from our shores. But a tunnel would obviously allow them to stampede

into the country, foaming at the mouths, and that would be that: all dead. It was my aunt who coaxed this worry out of me. She kindly explained that I had got this entirely wrong and the fear vanished, only to be immediately replaced by nuclear war, not so easy to explain away.

I had watched the nuclear war survival information film at my school and none of it made any sense.

‘How can taking the kitchen door off its hinges and leaning it against the hall wall prevent me getting covered in nuclear fallout?’ I wondered. ‘How long do I sit there eating cold baked beans directly from the tin before it is safe to come out?’

The information film told us to wait for the BBC radio announcements.

‘But won’t all the BBC people be sitting under their doors, eating baked beans from the tin?’

A troubling thought which grew and grew. A terror which was ultimately answered with, ‘Don’t worry about it.’

When I was older I understood this really meant, ‘We don’t know.’

No one at all had the answer because there *is* (and *was*) no answer, and my worry became (and remains): ‘So just *who* is in charge?’ The exact same question my much more advanced sister had been asking since she was a tiny tot.

Children are more aware of what’s going on than we care to believe.