**‘The Child In Time’ by Ian McEwan, tells the story of Stephen, remembering the Saturday morning when he took his three-year-old daughter, Kate, to the supermarket.**

In the hall Kate came towards him talking loudly, holding up the scuffed toy donkey. He bent to loop the red scarf twice around her neck. She was on tiptoe to check his coat buttons. They were holding hands even before they were through the front door.

They stepped outdoors as though into a storm. The main road was an arterial route south, its traffic rushed with adrenal ferocity. The bitter, anti-cyclonic day was to serve an obsessive memory well with a light of brilliant explicitness, a cynical eye for detail. Lying in the sun was a flattened Coca-Cola can whose straw remained in place, still three-dimensional. Kate was for rescuing the straw, Stephen forbade it. And there, by a tree, as though illuminated from within, a dog was shitting with quivering haunches and uplifted, dreamy expression. The tree was a tired oak, whose bark looked freshly carved, its ridges ingenious, sparkling, the ruts in blackest shadow.

It was a two minute walk to the supermarket, over the four-land road by a zebra crossing. Near where they waited to cross was a motor-bike salesroom, an international meeting place for bikers. Melon-bellied men in worn leathers leaned against or sat astride their stationary machines. When Kate withdrew the knuckle she had been sucking and pointed, the low sun illuminated a smoking finger. However, she found no word to frame what she saw. They crossed at last, in front of an impatient pack of cars which snarled forwards the moment they reached the centre island. Kate looked out for the lollipop lady, the one who always recognised her. Stephen explained it was Saturday. There were crowds, he held her hand tightly as they moved towards the entrance. Amid voices, shouts, the electro-mechanical rattle at the checkout counters, they found a trolley. Kate was smiling hugely to herself as she made herself comfortable in her seat.

The people who used the supermarket divided into two groups, as distinct as tribes or nations. The first lived locally in modernised Victorian terraced housed which they owned. The second lived locally in tower blocks and council estates. Those in the first group tended to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, baked beans, instant soup, white sugar, cupcakes, beer, spirits and cigarettes. In the second group were pensioners buying meat for their cats, biscuits for themselves. And there were young mothers, gaunt with fatigue, their mouths set hard round cigarettes, who sometimes cracked at the checkout and gave a child a spanking. In the first group were young childless couples, flamboyantly dressed, who at worst were a little pressed for time. There were also mothers shopping with their au pairs, and fathers like Stephen, buying fresh salmon, doing their bit.

What else did he buy? Toothpaste, tissues, washing-up liquid, and best bacon, a leg of lamb, steak, green and red peppers, radice, potatoes, tin foil, a litre of Scotch. And who was there when his hand reached for these items? Someone who followed him as he pushed Kate along the stacked aisles, who stood a few paces off when he stopped, who pretended to be interested in a label and then continued when he did? He had been back a thousand times, seen his own hand, a shelf, the goods accumulate, heard Kate chattering on, and tried to move his eyes, lift them against the weight of time, to find that shrouded figure at the periphery of vision, the one who was always to the side and slightly behind, who, filled with a strange desire, was calculating odds, or simply waiting. But time held his sight for ever on his mundane errands, and all about him shapes without definition drifted and dissolved, lost to categories.

Fifteen minutes later they were at the checkout. There were eight parallel counters. He joined a small queue nearest the door because he knew the girl at the till worked fast. There were three people ahead of him when he stopped the trolley and there was no one behind him when he turned to lift Kate from her seat. She was enjoying herself and was reluctant to be disturbed. She whined and hooked her foot into her seat. He had to lift her high to get her clear. He noted her irritability with absent-minded satisfaction- it was a sure sign of her tiredness. By the time this little struggle was over, there were two people ahead of them, one of whom was about to leave. He came round to the front of the trolley to unload it on to the conveyor belt. Kate was holding on to the wide bar at the other end of the trolley, pretending to push. There was no one behind her. Now the person immediately ahead of Stephen, a man with a curved back, was about to pay for several tins of dog food. Stephen lifted the first items on to the belt. When he straightened he might have been conscious of a figure in a dark coat behind Kate. But it was hardly an awareness at all, it was the weakest suspicion brought to life by a desperate memory. The coat could have been a dress or a shopping bag or his own invention. He was intent on ordinary tasks, keen to finish them. He was barely a conscious being at all.

The man with the dog food was leaving. The checkout girl was already at work, the fingers of one hand flickering over the keypad while the other drew Stephen’s items towards her. As he took the salmon from the trolley he glanced down at Kate and winked. She copied him, but clumsily, wrinkling her nose and closing both eyes. He set the fish down and asked the girl for a carrier bag. She reached under a shelf and pulled one out. He took it and turned. Kate was gone. There was no one in the queue behind him. Unhurriedly he pushed the trolley clear, thinking she had ducked down behind the end of the counter. Then he took a few paces and glanced down the only aisle she would have had time to reach. He stepped back and looked to his left and right. On one side there were lines of shoppers, on the other a clear space, then the chrome turnstile, then the automatic doors on to the pavement. There may have been a figure in a coat hurrying away from him, but at that time Stephen was looking for a three-year-old child, and his immediate worry was the traffic.

This was a theoretical, precautionary anxiety. As he shouldered past shoppers and emerged on to the broad pavement he knew he would not see her there. Kate was not adventurous in this way. She was not a strayer. She was too sociable, she preferred the company of the one she was with. She was also terrified of the road. He turned back and relaxed. She had to be in the shop, and she could come to no real harm there. He expected to see her emerging from behind the lines of shoppers at the checkouts. It was easy enough to overlook a child in the first flash of concern, to look too hard, too quickly. Still, a sickness and a tightening at the base of the throat, an unpleasant lightness in the feet, were with him as he went back. When he walked past all the tills, ignoring the girl at his who was irritably trying to attract his attention, a chill rose to the top of his stomach. At a controlled run- he was not yet past caring how foolish he looked- he went down all the aisles, past mountains or oranges, toilet rolls, soup. It was not until he was back at his starting point that he abandoned all propriety, filled his constricted lungs and shouted Kate’s name.

Now he was taking long strides, bawling her name as he pounded the length of an aisle and headed once more for the door. Faces were turning towards him. There was no mistaking him for one of the drunks who blundered in to buy cider. His fear was too evident, too forceful, it filled the impersonal, fluorescent space with unignorable human warmth. Within moments all shopping around him had ceased. Baskets and trollies were set aside, people were converging and saying Kate’s name and somehow, in no time at all, it was generally known that she was three, that she was last seen at the checkout, that she wore green dungarees and carried a toy donkey.