

This is *Phoenix* by Mike Bartlett, produced by ETT as part of Signal Fires, a national storytelling project.

Phoenix

He shouldn't be here, Tim thought, as he stood in the dark, throwing plastic wrapper after plastic wrapper into the designer fire pit. He could hear behind him the muffled sound of his two-year-old daughter crying, and his wife of five years trying to get her to sleep. He had said there was a phone call to make and had escaped but that was a lie. He had needed a moment to himself, so he had gone to the car, grabbed the packet of Cadbury's Celebrations from the glove compartment and headed back to the designer fire pit where up until an hour ago they had been sat drinking wine. He'd stoked it and thankfully it had come back to life, the last couple of logs still with some flame. Since the birth of their child he had given up his vices. He drank in extreme moderation. He didn't smoke anymore. Drugs were years ago. But he could still eat chocolate. And then he realised if he threw the plastic onto the fire he could smell the mildly toxic fumes that came out. And he liked that. The idea of doing something very slightly wrong.

But of course he was doing something more than very slightly wrong in this moment. That was the problem. He felt sick, deep in his stomach. He thought this must be what it feels like when someone has committed murder but no-one else knows yet. Or stolen something extremely valuable. Like when the crime has been committed but the other shoe is yet to drop. The shit yet to hit the fan. And only you know. Only the culprit is aware, through this sickness, that they are in the calm before the storm.

He stopped eating the chocolates. He wasn't hungry. Instead he just took the wrappers off and kept burning them.

He wished he had a fucking cigarette.

The sound of his daughter, still crying. And across the way, he could hear a television on in the big house. His parents were watching downtown abbey. Not for the first time. His little family were staying the "Stable", a converted outhouse on his parents' small holding. They'd had it a few years. It was tasteful, but soulless. Much like them.

His phone was filling up with emails every minute, but that was normal. If that stopped, then he'd really be worried.

How had he ended up in this situation? It all felt so...pathetic. And without influence. Buffeted by circumstances when he had spent his adult life telling everyone who'd listen, student societies, then campaign groups, think tanks and now the highest level of

government, that one must always act strategically. Take the time and press forward with what you want. You start trying to fix things, address problems, soothe, apologise, solve, salve or explain and you'll weaken. Sink. You'll never escape.

And yet that was exactly what he had done in the last twelve hours. He'd only reacted, spontaneously and impulsively and as a result had made a number of terrible decisions. All leading him here to this fucking designer fire pit.

And now his imagination was starting to work. This was almost certainly going to be the end for him. And his career, and his family. When the people found out that he had contravened the rules, the guidance, possibly even the law (was it the law yet? He had to find out) to come up here, they'd have what they needed to remove him. They wouldn't care that in these circumstances the list of people his wife would allow to look after their daughter was four people long and that two of those people were her parents who lived in New Zealand. And that him and his wife were looking like with this positive diagnosis they might get very ill indeed and so it really was their only option to get to his parents as quickly as they could. No one would hear that. Or believe it. And as he sat there he didn't think it sounded much more than an excuse. Others will, at this moment, be dealing with worse...

Why did he agree to her? She just went on and on at him. Saying there was no options saying he had to put his daughter first this time to hell with anything else this was family and if he didn't drive them she'd get in the fucking car and do it herself, and he tried to make an argument but she didn't listen, she wasn't rational she was just thinking about herself and their daughter and nothing else.

Which, he supposed, is what a parent is supposed to do.

In which case what was he? As throughout it all, he was thinking of all sorts of things. They could get an emergency nanny. They had friends. It would all be fine. And the consequences of breaking the rules could be disastrous, for the future. For the career.

But she had kept on. And he...he'd found himself getting their stuff in the car in half an hour then then all getting in and setting off up north, only calling his parents once they were on their way...How had he made that decision. He found he couldn't remember...

His wife appeared at the window looking for him. He sent a text to her. "Sorry this is taking a while". She received it and looked irritated. He hated her for a split second. She had put on weight since the baby, but he had got fitter. She was greying. His hair was thick and dark. They were heading in different directions as they got older, he was realising. He was getting more attractive, she was getting less. And she'd developed this hectoring tone...

Was that why he'd done it? He'd simply capitulated to her going on and on, like a downtrodden husband from an eighties sitcom.

He thought of the last women he'd had sex with before his met his wife. In 2014. She was thirty. A hotel receptionist in New York. She'd flirted with him, and at first he thought it was just her professional manner, but day by day she'd become more forward and he'd responded. By the end of the week they were having a drink on her night off. He'd ended booking the best suite in the hotel. It had cost him a month's salary but it was worth every penny. They'd drank and kissed and smoked on the roof overlooking the city, then taken each other's clothes off and fucking fucked in all sorts of ways until they were sweaty and made such a huge mess. They had woken early, showered and gone for breakfast at a terrible diner then walked in the autumn leaves in Central Park. At the time he hadn't known it was a last hurrah. But...hurrah.

A far cry from this. In the grip. Of a situation. Of a wife. A child. A role. A global fucking pandemic at the worst possible fucking moment. Just when he was getting everything done.

He looked out into the dark. What if he just walked away. He could simply start again. That would be wonderfully strategic. Convention would tell you there would be huge consequences. There wouldn't. He could find new low profile work. He could deal with his soon-to-be ex-wife and child via intermediaries and emails. His friends would be shocked but the important ones would stick by him, putting it down to a mid life crisis. His daughter would hate him, but there were millions of daughters who hated their fathers. And who knows, she might eventually understand it and they would have a relationship. And he would be free. To do whatever the fuck he wanted again. To change the world. To change HIS world.

The darkness. Out there. It appealed. He threw the celebrations box on the fire. It burned quickly and disappeared.

To be honest he might have to escape soon anyway. After what he'd done, cajoled into this foolish trip, he would be forced to resign and everything he was trying to achieve in government would be at an end. And more than that, he was such a high profile figure that his disobedience of the rules might lead to a national collapse in confidence in the governments response. And that collapse could lead to people NOT following the rules, and that would, as things were right now, lead to deaths. Thousands of deaths. And yes the more he thought about it the more he realised there was no escaping that reality. When this emerged, as it no doubt would, he, and his nagging wife, would have been responsible for more people dead than would fit in a sports hall. Thousands maybe. What would that do to him? That would be all that his life would be about. This mistake. And the consequences.

The unmistakable tone of Carson complaining.

His daughter now calming down.

His wife singing her to sleep.

A crackling fire starting to die.

He went over to the log store. It was empty. He went back to the fire then looked around. There was a tree in the dark. He had no torch and so stumbled across the field towards it. His foot hit a - what? - maybe a clump, and he tripped and fell into the dirt. He lay there for a second, enjoying the cool of the ground, enjoying lying down; the simplicity of the earth. Perhaps he could just stay here and see what happened?

He hauled himself to his feet and staggered over to the tree. He ran his hands on the ground, around the trunk and found dry material. Not branches but a lot of twigs, protected from the rain but the canopy of leaves above. He picked some up in his hands but it wasn't enough. It would be gone quickly and he was enjoying the fucking fire. He looked back at it - it was nearly dead, nearly gone forever.

Strategy.

He took off his jumper suddenly, leaving him only in a thin t-shirt. He knotted the sleeves and the hole for his head and made a bag out of it, then he started filling it with dry twigs. When he'd finished, he started back towards the fire, but the flames looked so small and nearly gone so he ran. He ran, covered in mud and wet, holding his jumper bag, and as soon as he got back to the embers he tipped the twigs onto the last few flames. As he did it, dust went up on the air, and in a moment he realised he'd made a mistake. The tipping of the twigs had crushed the embers, stopped the oxygen and put the whole thing out.

He was desperate. Once again, he hadn't been thinking. What had happened to him? Whatever the unique talent that had got him this far, had gone. He'd made a series of mistakes and his life had led him to a child he didn't love, a wife who disgusted him, a cold field and thousands dead, at his hands.

He shut his eyes...

...then suddenly he felt the heat. He opened them and saw the fire burst back, as the twigs finally caught, and it burned brightly, more than ever before.

He sat. The fire hot, and captivating.

His wife had come to the window, noticing the flames. She had a cup of tea now and as the yellow light caught her face she looked beautiful. So much more sexual and wonderful and intelligent than that fucking hotel girl. This was the woman he loved. And she didn't nag, she fought. For their child. And that wasn't wrong. That was primal.

And now he remembered! He hadn't been nagged into the decision, there had been a moment, as he began to pack up provisions in their kitchen before they left, that he'd realised this was completely the right thing to do. Put his family first and figure it out from

there. He would tell anyone else to do the same. And he was strong, he was literally in power, this was the right thing to do and he would deal with the consequences.

And as the flames danced he made a new plan. No one knew about this trip currently. Not really. He would keep it that way. Not hidden exactly but unremarkable. And if eventually it came out, he would be unapologetic. He did the right thing for his family. He was an important man doing important things. He felt certainty in his core. There was absolutely one rule for him and one rule for them. Because he wasn't like them. He was exceptional, in the factual use of the word. He had got to where he was because he was not like the rest. And maybe there would be thousands dead on this occasion but because of his work, his interventions, his policies, his determination and courage, many more would live and thrive and not many individuals had the guts to deal with those calculations and take on leadership of scale and existence but it was necessary that some people did and he was well qualified to be one of those few.

He stood up, now warm and bright, and ready to return to the house.

Fuck them all. He could do what he wanted. Because he was right. Sooner or later they would realise that. And if they hated him in the meantime he would just smile.

His wife saw him through the window, and looked surprised. She smiled at him. Like she saw him in a new way. Like he must look newly attractive. Sexy maybe.

Their daughter had gone to sleep. The evening was young. He smiled at his wife and started to head back to the house, feeling elemental, powerful and very much in control. He was ready.

His wife opened the door and they kissed. Tonight would be glorious. As he had told his colleagues for years...

There was an opportunity in any crisis.

Story was read by Bertie Carvel. Directed by Richard Twyman. Sound design and composition by Ben and Max Ringham. This was an ETT production.