

THE DOG FRIEND OF DASTARDLY

Driving to dad's, I play the same music. *Off The Wall* from forty years ago. I start it at the seventh roundabout so it will last until I see him waiting outside the flats with his terrible milk eyes. I set off at seven-thirty every time. I take the same route every time. I look for the same gap in the skies.

Halfway there, a diversion. A police officer, waving the queue towards endless dog-leg B-roads. I should have expected this because it's the end of summer, a last chance for tourists to look at the scenery instead of the blind bend and smash up their people-carriers and the people they are carrying. Today though, I'm afraid of it – I don't mean the spill of families across the blood-oil road. I'm afraid of delay. I'm afraid of turning back. I grip the wheel – I'm going to do it, I'm going to turn back, I'm going to turn around – but I'm being waved on, I have to go forward, I have to follow the others following the waving arm and I do one of those smiles reserved for complying with police officers as I'm kangarooing out of first into dark, unknowable holloways and pausing MJ to make sure that *Rock With You* will be playing as I reach the terrible eyes.

We've come up in the lift that has a fold-down seat in case you decide an elevating plastic stool is where you'd like to have your heart attack. He pretends it's for my sake that we never take the stairs. Along the first-floor corridor, noticeboards offer a timetable of sad endings:

Tuesday: Morag on Amputation Care.

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Thursday: Tristan from Alistair's Auctions will be in the communal lounge (bring a loved one's jewellery).

Sunday: Zoe on Planning Your Fun Funeral.

Dad slaps his pockets for the key. Further up, a door opens. A little man comes out, sees us, makes a squeak and goes back in.

We're in dad's flat. It hits me as we go along his hallway. Stale ancient man air. Breath and skin and oils leaving their surfaces with nowhere to go but into the cushions and carpet and walls and now into my hair and nostrils. I can't blame his being alone for the terrible air. She was as bad, in the end.

Every time I visit – he's doing it now look – he fills the kettle RIGHT TO THE TOP. It takes so long to boil. My stomach changes gears while the plastic jug is shaking, dribbling its final heaving sobs. I want to put my arm around it but I'd get a scald and I am ridiculous.

He shuffles around the kitchenette while I empty the box of food. Tins of soup, peaches, peas, boiled potatoes, red salmon. Packets of pink wafers, fondant fancies, foil-wrapped mini-Swiss rolls – a little treat, a moment of joy for the palate, a soft landing for precarious teeth. I stack the things in the bread bin alongside the pink wafers, fondant fancies and foil-wrapped mini-Swiss rolls I brought last time, then point to the instructions for fish fingers and oven chips. I buy the same food every time. He never glances at any of it but always

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checks to make sure I've shut the rusted fridge-freezer. His brain is sharp. He tells me every time, tapping his head bones.

'It's all alright up here.'

Dad is ninety-one. This is his sheltered-housing flat. Look at this light-pull that's actually an emergency bell ready to receive the lunge of someone about to die. My dad is going to die soon – even he won't pull the wool over this news. I stand by the mantel clock. One hundred and eighty minutes to go. I do this every two months. I live an hour and a half up the coast. He tells me not to come, pretends it's for my sake, because of my back with the driving. We talk on the phone every week – me shouting into his deafness. I could swear on the phone. I could say every Terrible Word in the dictionary. Only, I've never been a swearer and he is ninety-one – he'd be hurt, I'd feel terrible – and there are too many fucking words to choose from.

The clock is brown plastic. It belongs to mum and is in the shape of Muttley, the dog friend of Dastardly. It has an alarm: Muttley's wheezy laugh. She used to set it off as I came through the door. Her dark eyes would light up, her mouth would crease. She was immature.

He wanders in, bashing into the side-table like a carthorse with blinkers. He has glaucoma but still drives. He's going to kill someone on the road but I can't worry about that.

'Here love, enough milk?'

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He looks where I'm looking, presses Muttley's head and Muttley dies in the middle of a *shee-hee-hee*.

Now he's putting thick bread under the eye-level grill with his thick fingers. He used to be stocky with massive eyebrows and a powerful walk and is smaller now, his muscles wanting to lie down, but even in the tottery gait there's a strength squaring up to spite his body. I go to the photographs in their pound-shop frames, swiping a thumb across the glass – why is everything in this flat sticky? – and suddenly he's behind me.

'Lovely isn't she? That face.'

'Mm.'

'Shame you take after me.'

Now he's looking for something to show me, to prove he's been living, that he is alive, and turns to mum's cabinet: a tin Churchill holding an ashtray; a bronze ballet dancer from a bombed German factory; a clay sculpture of three hills and you just know the hills are a mother and two children; a tier of scallop shells Lester gave her. Dad peers into the glass.

'They'll be yours, all these. Or I might sell everything.'

I scream and hope it's only happening inside. The air goes grey and lined – the toast is burning, he's going to burn to death one day but I can't worry about that. I tap his arm, point to the smoke.

'Alright love, I can see it, I'm not daft.'

He's under the smoke detector waving a dirty tea cloth.

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‘Dad, let me help.’

‘Oh sit down, I’m doing it my way.’

I mouthe the Terrible Words. Perhaps he sees my ribs go in. Anyway, he tries his light voice.

‘You’ll mess up my system you will. Now just sit there daft thing, relax a minute. Here’s today’s paper, read the paper.’

I make a show of stretching my legs and carry on to the bedroom. On the dressing-table, an Open University pin; a photograph of me; rings for her tiny fingers; a photograph of Lester; a souvenir mask from Phantom of the Opera; a photograph of Lester, mum and me. On the walls, Native Americans. She was northern with olive skin and the family story went that a mysterious ship ran aground near Southport and soon babies were being born black-haired and dark-eyed. The story changed, it was the Spanish Armada, it was a canoe, it had come from Canada, it appeared overnight on a spring tide, each adaptation believed by us – by mum too, I think. Sometimes she asked us to call her Shawnee or Cheyenne, sometimes it was Conchita or Dancing Water, sometimes it was Barbara Brown-Feather, sometimes she wanted to be any other name and it was funny at the time. Now through the velvet gloom, I watch myself, small for seven, in a dress with gingham fishes. I’m on their bed in the late ’sixties in a house of corrugations and green-gloss skirtings. Sitting with a book of feathered chiefs, mum leaning in to turn the pages, cologne ghosting her wrists as she strokes the seasoned face of some elder woman

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who isn't going to give in, you can see it look, in the rise of her chin. Mum, lifting my face.

'Never be cruel, sweetheart.'

He calls me in. I come and sit on the leather armchair that used to be beige, now charcoal with gunk yet cleaner than when she was here. Then it was sordid. The carpet shines still where her slippers slid forward-back, feet swelling maroon. Once she was beautiful. Soon he'll sit opposite on the only dining chair. It will be like an interview with nobody wanting to ask the questions. For now, I shout useless news of the diversion. He says he'll do me a route map for the home leg.

'I know every road, you know. I know every road like the back of my hand. I've been driving seventy years. I know every corner.'

Did I scream, just then?

Here he is, carrying the toast, opening the jam like a waiter presenting the wine. This is what is left. Dead mum, dead brother, but a dad alive, be grateful. I eat the toast, he opens his mouth and I see a new photograph. This one look, doesn't fit its frame. He must have shoved it in, won't even have seen who it is. It's so faded that the black and white is trying to colour itself. Mum, falling around inside an unthoughtful frame. Trying to get back her colours. I bring it to dad who squints, nods, pretends, then goes off to write his reverse route map. Into his back I whisper, 'I hate you.' I don't know why. I do

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know why, I know this black and white day above the sea in a different century, on a different planet.

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We were on the clifftop by the Head. It was Mothering Sunday and we'd taken a picnic on the trolley bus after church. It was cold but we put a bed-sheet down and mum sat and ironed her skirt with her hand even though the skirt was uncreasable. Lester was in his Boy's Brigade gear. He was running, his hair yellow, his face red, his arms out wide.

'Biplane mum! Mum! Biplane!'

She didn't join in and we didn't understand – she *always* joined in. So my brother went round and round on his own and dad threw down his coat, lifted him onto his shoulders and they looped the loop to the cliff edge until dad's foot went in a rabbit hole and Lester made his first solo flight, cracked his nose and didn't cry.

We ate our sandwiches while dad told us about the first air show with its races and stunts, about the plane that tried to land on a chalk line but crashed and broke the pilot's neck to bits right where we were sitting. Dad jumped up. 'Least he tried! He didn't sit about in his only tie, he had guts, that's what we're going to do, get our guts, and by summer we'll have a car, a job, we'll be on the up like these Americans. There's going to be Americans this summer on the moon – the *moon* Lester! – nothing'll be the same after, you can't get higher than that.'

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We all looked up but it was just the day-moon not ready to shine. Lester played catch with me and whenever I missed, he shouted loud and clear.

‘You can do it, Viv!’

Usually we’d be climbing over mum like cubs but she was sitting very still, her long legs folded beneath, or perhaps her legs were trapped – yes, that’s what I saw that day – her long legs were making roots, fingering through the soil, down past the worms and stone-age arrows. While I was looking over at her, the ball smacked my ear, I screamed and dad shouted, ‘Lester, she’s seven for God’s sake!’

Lester’s lip wobbled so I ran to him and shook his hand like I’d seen in a cricket match and he laughed and let me give him a Chinese burn. Mum told us to settle down then put a hand inside my sock and rubbed the grass stain. Dad had his paper but kept blowing on his hands. Nobody was talking. I asked mum to please not rub anymore and had to keep saying it until she stared at the hole in my Sunday sock, kicked off her only good shoes, shoved a fingernail between her toes and made a rip in her tights. I held my breath then saw the silver in her eyes and we laughed and I walked my fingers up the ladder and pulled her arm around me and lay against her side with heartbeats of 4711 cologne and thought that as long as we stayed here, there was nothing to worry about. We sat up, my knees had gone blue but I prayed no one would see and make us go home. A boy went past high up on his dad’s shoulders, and Lester must have remembered our own family of a thousand seconds before because he went in his kitbag, brought out the

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papier maché jam jar we'd made in Sunday School, put a daffodil in it and saluted mum. Dad pulled him down and kissed him in his neck. Mum inhaled the flower. Water fell, roughing the paper. We were being too gentle, I was scared suddenly. It was time to go but we lay back, all four of us, like we'd dropped from the sky.

Later that day, dad disappeared. Lester said he'd jumped off the cliff because of owing money to big men. I wailed and Lester straightaway said that really dad was in America training to be an astronaut. We lost our house and everything in it except for the cabinet of mum's things. We lived without dad in a prefab where Lester cooked sausages and I dragged the pouffe to the armchair ready for mum's double-shift feet. Months later she let dad back to earth but became watchful and we did too, only we didn't know what we were watching for.

I never look in the bathroom mirror but now I catch myself, too old look, for a denim jacket, summer dress, fringed ankle boots. Too old for this pretend festival costume, too old for being the daughter of a living person. If he'd paid his bills – if you'd paid your bills dad, if you'd kept one job, if you'd not run away. Or if you'd just stayed on the moon.

Her tablets are on the end of the bath, after two years. This floor is sticky. When he dies the council will blame me for the dirt. He wouldn't let people in. They offered a wheelchair and oxygen tank. He said they were interfering.

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They offered a hairdresser, optician, chiropodist. He said he'd take her to those places himself. So she never had her hair washed, nails cut, outdoor shoes, reading glasses. He wouldn't let me launder their stinking clothes. I can't worry about that, I have to sit on the toilet lid or I will faint. He calls out as he goes past.

'I do miss her you know love.'

'Fuck off!'

I don't know if he hears.

In the lounge he's rubbing his hands together. And it just comes out.

'Fancy a drive dad, up to the Head?'

Immediately, he teeters over his Velcro shoes, reaches for his keys. I shake my head. He nods.

'Alright love, you drive.'

In the lift he tells me the route to take while I drag the Terrible Words to a pillowy place where I am a nice person. I see he never visits another human except his wife at the burial ground where he sits on a picnic stool sinking skew-whiff into the dirt. Where he looks left to talk to my dead mum, then right to talk to my dead brother. I want to go home. It was the same before: counting one hundred and eighty minutes of watching her sinking skew-whiff into the sofa, then I'd glance at Muttley, take the stairs two at a time and drive away with *Off The Wall* flicking the film of everything off my exposed parts. *I* am the running-away one. *I* was the one not able to bear the sight of her

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smiling and let-down, but I did bear it every time – the neglect and squalor I left her with – because I was without courage, because I couldn't ask this man, Who Did You Ruin Us For? Because I am still without courage, building a library of swears along my brain-blood, bulging with SCREAMS and FUCKS, wanting to burst all the viscous words into the face of this elderly stranger. Only, between floors I see mum waiting week after week for the chance to start her eyes shining, for a chance to set off the alarm as I arrived. It wasn't for Muttley she shone, was it.

He's following me down the corridor, puffing his cheeks, arms pistoning like a marathon walker, doing a jokey boy's voice:

'Wait for me wait for me!'

What's he doing, is he having a brain event? That would be better than this terrible moment: he's being grateful and suddenly I don't know about hate and I don't know about love. I know about things left too long to boil, too hot to ever touch. I know there's a kind of human who can take a single moment and make it better just by living it. Look at this, years and years ago, in the New Forest tearoom with all of us being quiet, then mum taking a mouthful of scone, leaving a coil of cream on her nose and we gasp then see she's done it on purpose and we laugh until tears plink off our lips and she says, 'We'd better go, we're causing a right kerfuffle', then we drive past the wild ponies, past the gypsy women holding out fistfuls of gold. Me, mum, Lester singing. Dad trying a smile in the rear-view of his Zodiac, he's been let back, he's on

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the up. One silver moment, you can't get higher than that, but this one meets me outside the flats of terrible milk-eyes and punches me through the chest.

We're at our cars. He's holding a travel blanket, demonstrating how to put it around the shoulders, white hair flying like underwater weeds. He's in a sour shirt and grubby trousers but oh he's naked and afraid. I'm allergic to wool but I don't remind him. He drapes it over me. I let it prickle and stab. Suddenly I move in, catching his arms in a hug. I know about hate but into his chest I say, 'Shee-hee-hee'

and hold onto him and hold on and hold on and hold on until he says,

'Don't be daft love'

but he holds on too.

The End