

After the funeral, I pull up near the derelict garages at the top of Shrubbery Gardens and sit listening to the thrum of the engine before taking the path that runs behind the derelict garages to a long-forgotten haunt of ours.

We used to call it the cliff. I did anyway. Dad didn't call it anything. Sundays, after lunch, I'd wait by the back door fiddling noisily with the latch. He would sigh as he stood up, then slip-on his tatty wax jacket and cap. Not once did Dad say no.

Much has changed. Even the low stone wall separating the path from the trees and bushes is more moss than stone and the winding trail we once followed has been lost beneath a network of ground-hugging ivy. I slide my hand through a tangle of roots searching for a nub of rock I remember grabbing hold of before pulling myself up to the first ledge. Dad always insisted I go first. 'Don't dilly-dally,' he'd say, kick me on the behind and I'd scamper up the side of the cliff like a startled squirrel. I'd hear him wheezing behind me complaining, as he breached the top, about the rasping bags of wind in his chest. Light up a cigarette whilst I chewed gum. I have no idea what he thought about up there. He never said much. Neither did I. Sometimes he'd smoke two cigarettes.

My right-hand closes over the once-familiar piece of rock rubbed smooth over the years by other climbers, but when my other hand pulls on a root it gives way sending me sliding back down to the bottom on the front of my suit jacket.

A twig cracks behind me and I spring up to standing. A ginger cat, frozen with one paw poised over another twig, is transfixed—not by me—but with something in the undergrowth. Perhaps Dad's ghost has fled the company of grey-faced mourners at the crematorium and come here. I imagine a telltale trail of cigarette smoke giving him away behind a bush—just the sort of prank he'd play.

“I don’t believe in ghosts!”

The cat spins one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and sprints back towards the path.

After untangling a length of ivy that’s wound itself around one of the jacket buttons, I loosen the snug-fitting jacket. Felicity was right. I should have worn one of my Marks-and-Spencer’s suits to Dad’s funeral, not one that fitted me when I was a teenager. But then I didn’t wear it for me. I wore it for him.

The first time Dad saw me in this suit he peeked out from behind his Daily Mirror and asked me to walk away from the table so he could get a proper gander at me. Mum told him he shouldn’t encourage a pretty girl to dress like a boy but he ignored her, took a long drag from his second cigarette of the day, and told me I looked sharper than a pencil.

Sunlight, split by a tangle of branches above, dapples the twig-strewn earth with odd geometric shapes reminding me of some of the buildings I’ve dreamed up over the years as an architect. You might say my first project happened here. I scan the ground looking for a trace of my old bolthole. I never told anyone about that hole. Not even Dad.

Still on vibrate from the funeral Felicity’s cheerful smile fills the screen of my phone. I cut the call and pick a blackberry from a nearby bush. Consider, and then abandon the idea of trying once more to climb the cliff. “Another time, Dad,” I say and spit ink-black spit into the long grass. The blackberry was sour. I send my voice Scottish-accent high (Felicity’s a Glasgow girl): “Aimee, are you crazy? You can’t run out your father’s funeral like that.”

“I wasn’t staying to watch Dad’s cancer-riddled body disappear behind a pair of red-velvet curtains.” It’s a good rehearsal for what she’s sure to throw at me later.

I search my pockets for a much-needed cigarette and come out with a lighter modelled on an award-winning building I designed last year. Felicity had it made for my 45th birthday. Must have left my cigarettes in the car.

When I ring back, there's no answer so I do the next best thing and leave a message: "Sorry, Fi. Missed your call. I was half way up ... doing something. Listen, I should have told you I was leaving. The funeral wasn't doing it for me so... I left. Do you remember the cliff, the place I used to come with Dad?" I pause, remembering how at the end of summer Dad and I would return from our adventures up the cliff with tubs filled to the brim. If we caught Mum in a good mood, she'd stew our blackberries with apple and sugar and top the syrupy fruit with crumble. It's one of the few good memories I have of her. "Fi, when I left home and hooked up with you in London, just thinking about Mum and Dad back then and what happened after. I shouldn't blame Mum, should I? I mean, yes, she upped sticks but only after I'd flown the coop. When she never contacted me again, that's what hurt. Difficult to forgive her for that." My phone gives a warning beep. "Thinking about tracking her down, now Dad's gone. Light's fading here and battery's low. We'll talk later, yeah?"

Between the path and the base of the cliff the bushes are particularly dense and so dark, it's as if night has pitched camp here first before creeping out to slow-murder the day. I soon lose my bearings but push blindly on through the bushes until I reach a point where one huge branch has latched into my jacket, burying its vicious hooks into my chest. My head drops back and I stare up beyond the canopy of branches towards the top of the cliff—a dark promontory vaulting up into a sky burned orange by the setting sun. I picture Dad standing too close to the edge, his legs astride and hands on his hips, puffing away on

a King-size B&H. Sweeping a dark fringe of grey-flecked hair from across his eyes, he would look down on our house—visible at the end of the road—and sigh. It always worried me that weary expulsion of breath.

Certain something solid will support my lumbering steps forward I break free with a decisive rip across my jacket, wincing as thorns scratch the delicate skin across both breasts. Am I rising, funnelled upwards by a freak gust of wind to that place where we'd stand together in shared silence, close to the edge? No. The sound of branches crackling like rapid gunfire kills the soaring sensation and sharpens my senses to the rushing air as I plummet downwards. Hit the ground. Gasping, desperate to catch the breath that's been knocked out of me. My right arm held aloft in a last impulse to go up, reaching towards a ragged-at-the-edges circle of light above.

“Anything broke?”

“What? Don't know.”

“Twitch your toes.”

My arm withers like a sun-starved sapling and I curl my toes. I often talk to myself like this. At the beginning of a new project, it helps to sort the possible from the impossible. The voice is always deep and reasoning. Very Dad-like.

“Feel them?”

“Think so.”

“Now work your way up, back through muscles and connecting tendons.”

“Doing that ...”

“Take your time.”

“Ok.”

“Only move when—”

“Stop! You there ... Dad?”

“Yep.”

“One evening just after you lost that job working for that plumbing firm?”

“You sure you’re ok?”

“What were they called again?”

“Compression-Joints.”

“I used to joke about joints and you’d look concerned as if I might be a drug addict.”

I can see Dad, the first impulse of a smile on his fag pinched lips. “You were.”

“You’d just had a big row with Mum about money and for one moment, as you stood on the edge of the cliff.

“Ah, your cliff.”

“Blowing smoke into the cool October air, I thought you might jump. Mum could be so unreasonable.”

“I was blowing smoke rings—you were always drawing fantastic conclusions, Aimee.”

“I grabbed your elbow, pulled you back.”

“And I tripped over a rock. Landed flat on my arse.”

“You sat there with one side of your mouth turned down like a child. Then rolled onto all fours and offered to make me a doll’s house. I only had one doll.”

“But you loved buildings.”

“I should have told you before ...” I peel off jacket and trousers and roll onto my right side. Unfurl my body towards the light above. Free of the suit, free of restriction. Free of the past? “... I loved that doll’s house.”

“Then why’d you throw it out your bedroom window?” The voice in my head sounds softer, more like mine than Dad’s.

“Mum stopped me going out ... she said I couldn’t wear my suit and, I don’t know, I lost my temper ...”.

A metallic crackle under my left foot and I drop back onto my haunches.

Where am I?

Fingers probe the blackness like a blind pianist jabbing at the wrong keys. The image of Dad standing over the shattered remains of my doll’s house is so vivid I can see a little drizzle glaze my bedroom window over the image of him as he silently gathers the broken shards into a neat pile. “Sorry, Dad.”

Need a light. In a trouser pocket, I feel for and then find my phone. Dead. Plan B: my cigarette lighter sends a long licking flame into the dark, casting my shadow against walls interlaced with thin white roots running like veins through black, immutable flesh. A can of Newcastle Brown Ale lies at my feet.

Now I know where I am.

Taking my thumb from the gas, I slide to the bottom of a hole dug over thirty years ago. A hole I remember sneaking off to dig when I was little more than a kid. Mum and Dad safely stowed away in their separate beds, I would kit myself up with a beer and a broken-handled spade from Dad’s shed and spend the night digging this den, this sanctuary, this ... whatever you want to call it. Designed for a mutating teenage body to

smoke and drink and wrestle with an uncomfortable desire for girls over boys, little did I know it had a dual purpose: for the slightly overweight version of that awkward fifteen-year-old punk in a suit to work her way through a middle-aged post-funeral crisis.

I launch another flame into darkness but it quickly shrinks, flickers blue and dies. I curl up beneath the ragged circle of light, not so high that I couldn't easily reach up and pull myself out, just like I used to. But a nurturing silence, in womb-like darkness, soothes me. Keeps me here. Sends my troubled mind into a dreamless sleep.

I wake up with a tingling in my loins like the first flutters of an orgasm. I begin clawing at the damp earth until my fingers meet something hard and smooth. Feels like a bone. Yes, the remains, no doubt, of an animal that fell in and died here. Then I unearth smaller fragments and roll them between my fingers. They feel like teeth. When I uncover something larger, I pull at it until the earth yields and squat over it, gauging the girth of a smooth, dome-like object. Fingers fathom eye and nose holes so this must be a skull. But belonging to what? The largest wild creature might be a fox or badger, or a dog? No. The absence of a protruding nose makes this unlikely. Darkness, which before comforted me, is now charged with an unsettling current as I consider the possibility that my once safe-from-the-rest-of-the-world hole might be a grave: A human grave.

I chuck the skull out with an accuracy that always escaped me in a game of school netball. I remember Katy Braithwaite's long white legs disappearing into tantalizing short-skirt darkness. An unrequited crush at school, she married a mechanic and settled down. Had three kids. The usual. I grab at and kick down at a tangle of roots until I'm out, rolling among the crackling leaves. Next to me, where once rolled eyes and snorted a nose, three

holes set into bone, like little caves above an I'm-not-scared-of-death grin. The skull is unmistakably human.

Body stained with the same mud that caked my hands and darkened my nails when I was fifteen, and dressed only in boxer shorts and sport's bra, I clamber up the slope with the skull tucked under my arm. There's a little light from a half-moon making it possible to retrace my steps back over the low stone wall and down the overgrown path behind the garages. I find my black Lexus glistening under a flickering street light outside garages where Dad used to spend hours fiddling with some rusty wreck or other.

It's a relief to be inside my car. I slip on some jeans and a t-shirt from my overnight bag. The skull sits on the backseat watching as I go check my face in the rearview mirror. Good job no one was up and about to see a forty-six-year-old woman skulking about in her underwear carrying a human skull. I twist one of the twigs entwined in my usually neat hair and wipe my scratched, blood-smearred face with the a little spit in the palm of my hand. Under the driver's seat I find a half-smoked pack of Marlboro Lights. Insert one unlit in the corner of my mouth. A little of the screw-the-world attitude a cigarette always gives me, relaxes my trembling hands. I turn towards the skull on the backseat. "What you looking at?" The flickering street lamp outside animates its fiendish grin. Before I start up the car I throw the cigarettes out the window then, in the same moment, jump out to retrieve them. I spend the short drive to Dad's house explaining to the skull why I'm going to give up cigarettes when I'm good and ready and the only reason I'm not smoking now is because my lighter's out of gas.

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When I open Dad's squeaky back gate, Felicity's looking out of the large kitchen window dressed in an old pair of my mother's pink pyjamas. I've tucked the skull under my arm with the back of the head's facing out so it looks more like the bottom of one Dad's gone-wrong clay pots than a human skull.

She unlocks the door and I follow her to the kitchen table, which has been pushed aside to make room for a collection of stuff Dad must have boxed up and covered with a white sheet.

"I forgot my pyjamas. Found these in your father's ..."

"It's fine." Felicity is turned from me her shoulders tense, arms folded.

"Got your message hours ago. Where the hell have you been?"

"Trust Dad to box everything up before he kicked the bucket," I say.

She spins around. "Aimee?"

I feel like I've come in with holes in my jeans and a football—a much-preferred game over netball—tucked under my arm, not a skull. "Let me explain."

"It's not on leaving the crematorium without a word."

I pick up a bottle of red we'd started the night before and take a swig.

"What's going on?"

"I've found something." I turn the skull so its gruesome visage is facing her.

She doesn't scream but her jaw drops as if she's about to. When I place the skull on the table, she takes a step back before taking two steps forward. "Where have you been, the cemetery?"

"Sort of."

"You pulled a stunt there leaving me alone like that. I didn't know anyone."

“I went looking for Dad. I found him. Sorry.”

“That’s not your Dad because he’s been ... I saw ...”

“Course not.” I place the skull on the table. “Did you get his ashes?”

“Tomorrow. You can pick them then.” She pulls the white sheet covering Dad’s stuff. Underneath, his old Sony record deck flanked by a pair of huge mahogany speakers. “I’m not having that thing looking at me all night.”

Before Felicity can cover the skull with the sheet, I yank it back. The sheet dangles from my hands like a huge handkerchief, my attention captured by what’s behind one of the speakers. Felicity rolls her eyes to me but remains blank-faced.

I toss the sheet aside, drop to my knees and pull my old doll’s house out from behind the speaker. It’s fully intact as if it had never been smashed to smithereens on the crazy paving. “What the hell’s that silly bugger been up to?” When I open up the front of the house I find numerous pieces of miniature furniture meticulously arranged in every room. In the kitchen, there are three little figures.

Felicity picks up one of the figures. “This looks like you in that old suit you wore to the funeral. Real detail, even a Daily Mirror on the table next to your Dad. Who’s that at the sink?”

In my hand, the doll covers about half the length of my palm. Her hair painted brown, not grey, which is how I remember it had turned by the time I left home. “That’s my mum.”

“But why did he make these little dolls?” Felicity’s voice trails off, her gaze—and mine—drawn to a small, oval ceramic baking dish sitting next to the Dad-doll. On top, there’s cotton wool stiffened with glue and golden brown as if baked in the oven. Felicity

picks up the dish of make-believe apple and blackberry crumble and places it in her hand but I take it from her and position the dish back on the kitchen table in front of the Dad-doll, resting on his elbows reading the front page of the newspaper. Felicity picks the Mum-doll from my hand and bends the arms over its head and widens her legs so she stands like a rock star. 'He must have used pipe cleaners or something.'

"Don't! You'll break her."

Felicity looks at me with a worried expression similar to the one Mum would wear just before sending me off to school. The table, the doll's house and Felicity—refracted through a thickening lens of tears—divides into two then three before morphing into blurred blobs. A couple of tears stream down my cheeks.

"I've given up smoking."

"Well done you."

I could do with a cigarette. 'I cocked everything up back then.'

"When?"

"Before I ran off to London."

"Water under the bridge, Aimee."

"Fighting with Mum, sneaking out the house at 5 am. Saying nothing to either of them."

"You were a child for god's sake." She pauses "Although recent behaviour suggests you haven't changed much."

"I didn't call for three months. I never saw her again."

"You can't blame yourself."

“We were squatting that Victorian house in Dulwich when I contacted Dad again. Remember?”

Felicity groans—she’s heard this story too many times. “I know, she left a note on the fridge. Your mum must have been desperate to run off like that and never contact you again. It happens—it happened—you’ve moved on and no doubt, wherever she is, she’s moved on too.”

“What did she mean: ‘Sorry, I’ve had enough?’ Had enough of what, me? Dad? He told me once that he blamed her for me leaving.”

“Listen, let’s get stuck into that wine—think about the future—not get stuck on the past.” Felicity fills two tea mugs with red wine.

My fingertips brush across four faint wounds on my right arm, scars that can be felt if not seen. Wounds inflicted when Mum confronted me on the stairs, as I was on my way to Dad and apologise for throwing my doll’s house out the window. She gripped my arm so hard her nails broke the skin. Red eyes and wine-soaked breath drowned her words.

“Dad was right: I left because of her but it wasn’t just her. Fi, I got trapped in some bushes. Couldn’t move—thorns ripping me to shreds. It was dark and then ...”

“What?”

“I fell.”

“That explains your appearance, at least.” Felicity reaches her hand into a corner of the doll’s house, next to a slightly off scale but very good copy of the Victorian cabinet Dad still kept in the kitchen, and picks something up. “Strange.” She frowns at the thing she’s pinched between her thumb and finger then presses a miniature version of a shovel, with a broken handle, into my hand.

I can't speak, but when I do, pointing out Dad didn't keep gardening equipment in the kitchen, the words feel far, far away from the huge wave that's just hit. "Dad must have known."

"Known? Known what?"

"About the hole."

"Hole? Where you fell?"

Did he follow me up there? Watching in the bushes as I dug?

"Aimee?"

I'm like some rickety pier jutting out from the shore, seawater churning around rotten seaweed-covered foundations. I reach out to Felicity who takes the weight as my legs buckle beneath me.

"Ok?" she says.

"Yeah. No. Jesus Christ." I remember, having shaken Mum's clawing fingers from my arm, I ran to the one place I knew would calm me. When I got to my hole the cover I'd made from sticks and bound with string had been ripped off. It reeked of piss. Kids had probably used it as a toilet. I replaced the cover. Returned to pack for London.

Felicity hugs me then steps back, arms extended, as if ready to catch me.

"I'm fine."

"Good." She turns to the skull. Takes it gingerly in her hands.

"Put her back!"

"Her?" She holds the skull up.

I picture Dad in that stepping-back-from-the-edge moment before he offered to build me a doll's house. When I visited him after running away to London, his jaw was

tense, forehead furrowed just like that day on the cliff. Back then he'd somehow turned his life around. Walked away from despair after losing his job and built me the doll's house. I remember he showed me the note and Mum's empty cupboards and drawers proving beyond doubt—so he said—she'd gone for good.

Felicity returns the skull to the table. I knock back the glass of wine and tell her it was thinking about the doll when I said 'her'. Not the skull.

"If a body's buried in soil with a high peat content," she looks me in the eyes. "Then the bones might well have been preserved for hundreds of years."

When I follow up her unlikely conjecture with a plan not to involve the police she replaces the broken-handled spade behind the dresser. "Let's return the skull to your, what did you call it? Your hole."

With my finger and thumb, I squeeze the wiry arm of the me-doll around the Mum-doll's thin waist and bend the neck so my head's resting on her shoulder. Felicity is at my side. When she puts her head on my shoulder, I know she knows the truth.

"If something was broken, Dad fixed it. He was a maker and he was a mender. He wasn't a ..." I pause with the word 'killer' bullet-heavy on my tongue. An awkward silence follows in which I wonder whether one of those little bronze weights Mum used to balance the scales against flour and butter, might work better than the image of a bullet. I say neither. More than ever, I need that inner Dad-voice to guide my wandering mind.

"How did he do it?" asks Felicity.

"It must have been an accident. He lost his rag. Mum could be infuriating. She had started drinking more than usual. Who knows what was going on between the two of them. Pushed her. She fell, hitting her head against the cooker."

“So he killed—”

“Don’t.” One hand grabs Felicity’s arm. When she tries to shake it off I tighten my grip.

They feel close now, both of them: Mum at the sink and Dad at the table. I want to hold them both. Forgive them. Forgive me. I relax my hand and pull Felicity’s tense body to mine. Aroma of Lilly of the Valley: Mum’s favourite scent. I pull away, let her dry lips brush mine but before we kiss I whisper: “Do not say that. You can’t use that word about Dad. Ever.”