

At the eleventh hour

I stand on the first step and watch mum and dad in the living room. Mum is showing off her new necklace, freshly fashioned from thirty five daisies in the back garden, but an hour ago, and placed carefully on her bedside cabinet. I made enough of a disturbance in closing the door to waken mum from her afternoon nap. I found dog poo in the garden when I was collecting the daisies. It belonged to Mr Simmons' black dog. I returned it to the owner, posting it through his letter box. I stopped to look through the letter box because there was a strange sound coming from the bedroom. Two people in some kind of pain but I didn't call for an ambulance, worried that the man from the ambulance would step on the poo.

Embarrassingly, mum and dad catch each other in a cuddle and the cuddle evolves into a sort of dance around the furniture.

The tune from the old radio drifts through the open window. I hear the words outside on the step.

"I want to hold your ha-a-and.

I want to hold your hand."

My mum's eyes are closed. I can tell that she is counting her blessings. My mum uses that expression all the time. Just yesterday she was sitting at the kitchen table looking a bit lost and lonely and when I asked what was wrong, she told me not to worry, she was counting her blessings. I have no idea how to count a blessing.

My pal Andrew nudges me with his elbow and I drink down a strange concoction of embarrassment and confusion. I am further confused when I remember that Andrew's dad was killed in a car crash when he was two years old. Andrew tells me his mum is having a breakdown and that his granny will be staying with them for a while.

"You should count your blessings," I said.

He looked puzzled and ignored me.

“Quick,” he says, “let’s go and kick the ball before teatime.”

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I stand on the second step. I carry an envelope in my hand. It is from the school, saying that I have won a place in the summer camp for children gifted in mathematics. The secretary let me into the secret when I collected a note for my teacher.

“Your parents will be so proud,” she said.

The secretary drives a red Ford escort. Its number plate is BAD 516D. I have learned a lot from Mrs. Delaney. She always seeks me out and gives me nice things to eat. This started the day after I saw her kissing the headmaster in his big room with the leather armchair. She has a nice smile and wears a wig. I have studied her behaviour and have seen her adjust her hair before she leaves the office at the end of the day. She is always last to leave because she is more important than any other secretary. She told me that the headmaster often asks her to help him with difficult school matters. She lives at number 14 Pinton Drive, next door to the bingo hall.

I do not know how my mum will act when she hears my news. She has been acting strangely recently and I am growing more and more concerned that she will miss my tenth birthday. This morning she didn’t get out of bed and left me to tidy myself up and make breakfast. She didn’t tell me to put the TV off after thirty minutes but left me to watch it for a whole hour. I stole three chocolate biscuits and didn’t brush my teeth for a week but she never noticed.

Mum asked me if I missed not having a brother.

“No,” I replied. “I do not wish a brother.”

I stand on the third step and see my mum and dad in the bedroom. I don't like the way they are standing. Mum is shouting at dad, holding one elbow in the cup of her hand and pulling at a hair which keeps falling over her eyes. Dad grabs her and pulls her towards him. The bedroom door opens and another man stands in the room. His name is Alan and he plays golf with my dad at the weekend. Alan places a hand on my dad's shoulder. My mum storms out of the room. Alan kisses my dad on the lips and they stand in a close little huddle like they had a secret to tell each other. It is as if they are dancing.

My dad opens the wardrobe and rummages around amongst the clothes. He throws them higgledy-piggledy in a hold-all, never stopping to speak to mum, never stopping to count his blessings. I know the hold-all very well. There are stickers along its surface, stickers from Scarborough and Bournemouth and Edinburgh and one from the island of Majorca, our first time on an aeroplane. My mum was terrified of flying. She was cajoled into the adventure and dad gave her a strong drink of whisky at the airport and she fell asleep on the aeroplane and dad and I giggled, especially when he placed a sweetie wrapper under her nose and along her upper lip. He said she looked like granddad and I had to admit he had a point.

I find a sharp stone in the back garden and use it to make a wavy pattern along the side of Alan's car.

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I stand on the fourth step. I spot Gerry on the settee reading The Daily Record. He is my mother's new boyfriend and he drives a big car. The boot of the car is often full of big cases of beer which he buys from the supermarket. He dribbles when he speaks, little beads of water collecting between his lips. He stays overnight at the weekend and never remembers to bring pyjamas. He sits on the bottom step with no clothes on to dry himself after a bath.

"You could do with a good night out," he says.

He considers me a weirdo because I never go out at night. It is like he wants to educate me into the ways of the world.

“No,” I reply. “I have maths problems to solve. I have a big test coming up.”

He sighs and rubs between his thighs.

“It’s your loss.”

They have sex which doesn’t bother me. I was annoyed that he didn’t take up my offer to make use of the DW40 to prevent the bed making that loud creaking noise. I found a durex under the bed when I tried a bit of DIY on the squeaking springs. My PSE teacher showed us how to fit a Durex on a carrot. That would seem to be the most pointless of skills. The bed was still warm. I pulled the covers over my head and lay there for twenty minutes. I felt strangely close to mum. It was not something a fifteen year old should do but I was feeling very stressed.

My mum has been happier these last months. She has stopped scrubbing and washing the house at the weekends. Sundays were like Noah’s Flood and it wasn’t safe to leave my bedroom. She has started dyeing her hair.

Gerry can talk for Scotland. He comes from a very scary family. One brother is a boxer who can lift people off the ground with one arm. I am not looking forward to a family get-together. My dad couldn’t even lift me up with both arms.

I have been into town to buy some new clothes for my adventure. Tomorrow I set off to Manchester to meet up with the fifty brightest maths students in Britain. The letter said we are a formidable team and could change the world.

Since dad left we have struggled to make ends meet. Mum has worked in the local in the local post office, at the greengrocer’s and even tried child-minding but she so hated the parents of the children she looked after that she gave up on that idea. I have seen a hundred pounds passed from Gerry to mum’s purse. Mum looks so pleased I wanted to share in her new joy. A financial weight has been lifted. I do not consider Gerry to be a blessing. I consider him a necessary

evil. The twinkle in his eye is not endearing and neither is his sense of humour. He showed me a picture of his three brothers.

“Andy,” he told me one lunchtime, “could chew your Lego bricks until they were a pile of bright dust.”

I have always struggled to know when someone is being serious or when someone is making fun of me.

His finger was pointing at Andy in the line-up of the photograph.

“Has Andy eaten Lego before?”

“He is famous for it.”

“You're too old to play ith Lego bricks,”he adds.

“Lego helps with my mathematics. I use Lego to create new worlds.”

Gerry stuck a huge forkful of chips and pie in his mouth.

I imagined they had Lego eating contests in Coatbridge and Andy was a regular on the winner’s podium. I made a mental note never to visit Coatbridge.

Gerry is at the window waving at me. He took me to Easter Road to watch a football match and insisted on going to the pub afterwards. He said these were manly pastimes.

“You will find it easier to find a friend if you go to the football and drink beer.”

In the pub he spent his time telling people what a wonderful chap he was. If the people in the pub were the types of people who were to become my friends once I was a confirmed football supporter and beer drinker, I decided I would rather do without them. The pub was smelly with stale sweat and a visit to the toilet was an adventure I would rather not repeat. A man was sick on the floor when I was in the toilet. The sick clung to his clothes but it was the sick about his mouth I found harder to swallow.

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I stand on the fifth step. It is the day of my granddad's funeral. The living room is filled with darkness. Dark suits. Dark dresses. Dark expressions. Relatives from near and far. I catch sight of Auntie Jessie. She is holding my mum's hands. Auntie Jessie is the salt of the earth. She knows things and understands how the world works. I spent a lot of time at her house after my dad left. I would cycle the hills surrounding Edinburgh, twice round Arthur Seat, and then drop in on her for a cup of tea.

I have to return to university tomorrow to sit final exams.

Mum cornered me and wanted to ask my permission to marry Gerry. I couldn't say what I really thought. Her eyes were pleading with me to give the right answer.

I am not concerned about her happiness levels. I feel as if I have lost contact with her, as if some rope holding us together has been snapped. I wonder if we would have remained close if I had been a daughter rather than a son. She is a stranger to me, some grey haired woman holding my hand and staring at me with her tired eyes. Gerry has put on so much weight over the last year. I wonder if they still have sex.

Dad has long ago moved to London with his partner and I rarely see him. He even forgot to send me money on my birthday. When he left home all those years ago, I told Mrs. Delaney he was working away from home. I could tell she didn't believe me. In time the lie withered and died and nobody ever referred to him anyway.

The only person who really knows me is Tilly. She is coming to the funeral but her train from Newcastle has been delayed but the train station is only a ten minute walk away so it's not a disaster.

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I stand on the sixth step. Tilly is in the front room and my mother appears with a tray of cakes and a pot of tea. Tilly is explaining that her pregnancy has hit some difficulties, that her blood pressure is causing concern.

Tilly has said to me that the baby is the most important thing, that she, her life, is of secondary concern but I can't agree; I haven't said as much but I know that should it ever happen, should the doctor ever wish me to take sides- a baby or mother- then Tilly comes first. There is no way I could ever bring up a baby.

My mind is distracted by my PHD where I have hit a wall. The numbers don't add up. It seems that the workings of the universe and the laws of mathematics don't always agree with each other.

There are eleven steps in total from the pavement to the front door. Eight steps up to twin patches of grass and a final three to the door. The number eleven is a bit of an oddity and, sometimes, you have to ask why such numbers exist.

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I stand on the seventh step. Tilly is in the front room with little Eli, whose third birthday falls in three days' time. Gerry is bouncing him on his knees and Tilly and Eli are both laughing.

Tilly should hate Gerry and his working-class accent and interests, the way he just doesn't care about the world's problems. He is more interested in the progress of his football team than the progress of peace talks in the Middle East. Her upper middle class upbringing should have created an unbridgeable gap between them but she has something in common with him of which I am deeply envious; she shares his sense of humour.

I am more than ever conscious of my inability to cut it amongst the people I rub along with. I cannot socialise and have to concoct a series of excuses in order to avoid social occasions.

You don't miss what you haven't had but I am aware of a something, not a pain but the feeling that there is a gap somewhere within me and it stops me responding to the little things in life- a baby's shoe on the spike of a railing, a dog chewing its tail, a sweet potato in the shape of a penis.

I watched him joking with Tilly. It was only a matter of time before he made a sexual move towards her. She is bound to respond as I have been hopeless at sex.

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I stand on the eighth step and there, his back to the window, is my father. Although we haven't met for years, I recognise him immediately.

He turns to look out of the window and his mind is so engrossed that he doesn't see me.

My mother is by his shoulder. She raises a hand and runs a finger along his mouth.

I met my dad's partner by chance some years ago. I had visited the cinema to see "Titanic" with a girl named Sue. She was a chubby girl who seemed to want to be in my company.

The film finished and there were only a handful of cinema-goers on that mid-week evening. Voices were echoing around the stairwell and, suddenly, as if I had been struck by lightning, I recognised a voice behind me.

I grabbed Sue and pushed her into a cubby-hole in the stairwell. My father and his partner passed us.

What shocked me was their obvious happiness.

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I stand on the ninth step, my mother's sixtieth birthday present in my hands. It's a picture, a print, actually, of some fields and a waggon and a working horse. Carrying the picture home on the number 14 bus was no joke. Hard snow had gathered on the Playfair steps and I slipped more than once.

An old man came towards me on the steps. He was clearly uncertain about his footing and was clinging to the railings for dear life. As I drew level with him, he shouted across to me.

I couldn't make out what he had said. I cupped a hand about my ear.

"Snow is falling on the castle."

I turned my head up and there in the tall, grey sky, snow fell heavily on Edinburgh Castle, whitening the volcanic rocks and the castle itself. I spotted a light on in a turret and wondered who was there, a servant doing a spot of cleaning, a soldier doing his rounds, a light left on.

"You are struggling with the steps," I shouted foolishly.

"Touché," he replied. "We meet half way up or half way down. It matters not which way we move."

There was something in his smile that told me we had met before.

"Do you work at the university?" I asked.

"I did as a matter of fact. A minor figure. In the Philosophy department. Arguments for the existence of God. Not the flavour of the month. Most commentators think that after Hume there is little left to say."

"What a coincidence. I worked in the mathematics department. Our buildings were on the same side of George Square."

“I was only there for a short time. My contract was not renewed after the government cuts. What is your name?”

“Samuel Norton. Professor Norton.”

“I believe I have heard of you. A star in the mathematics firmament if my memory serves me right. My tenure was marked out by insignificance. One paper in the Philosophy journal in my early years but after that... There is something to be said for insignificance. I can't even say I regret my lack of achievements. I expect you achieved fame and fortune?”

I smiled at the man. I had nothing else to say.

“My mother is expecting me. I had better make tracks.”

Standing on the step I realise the present will cause problems. In her mind she will have to remove another painting to make a space for the new arrival.

My mother opens the door and kisses me on the cheek. She stinks of the same cheap perfume my father used to buy her all those years ago.

She has made mince and tatties. Nobody else is there. There is so much sorrow we could be meeting at a funeral. There is no cake, no celebration, no singing. Just me, my mother and a Constable print.

It is only when I jump on the bus that I realise I have got the month of her birthday wrong. I am exactly one month too late.

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I stand on the tenth step. I am incredibly drunk. My new book has been incredibly well received. Around the globe people are talking. My university has received notification that the central ideas of the book are causing a stir in Cambridge. The timing could not be better. I need to get away from Edinburgh.

Gerry now lives in Inverness with a lady half his age that he sold a kitchen to. My mother never recovered. Tilly tells me my mother has a broken heart.

Tilly informed me that my mother is on anti-depressants.

“You should comfort her,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Visit her. Assure her that she is loved, that her life has meaning.”

“You know that I am not comfortable with comfort,” I said. “Comfort is not my forte. Besides her life is empty and meaningless.”

“How can you say that?”

“What should I say? You see, I am the last person in the world you should send for if it is comfort you need.”

She pulled the duvet around her ears and I put the light out.

I did not forget our conversation and when I received the news about my book I thought that my good news would be a way to give her something to be happy about. My happiness could be her happiness. Isn't that the way it works in families?

I hold a box of fudge in my hand. I bought it in an exclusive sweet shop on princes Street. The young lady behind the counter asked if I wanted a bow around the fudge.

“We have a range of fabrics and colours,” she said, and showed them to me.

It was like choosing the correct tie for a special occasion.

“The red one,” I said.

“Red is my favourite colour,” she replied.

I wondered if she had been trained to say this.

In a blink she had attached the shiny material to the box.

I knock on my mother's front door. It seems a long time before my mother opens the door, time for me to be spotted by the new people next door.

"Oh, it's you," she says. "You shouldn't have bothered."

She has never forgiven me for the birthday fiasco some seven years ago. She brings up the subject every visit, in surprisingly clever ways. The last time she placed a little calendar as a mat under my cup of tea with the month and date circled. I feel as if I have done her a favour by my mistake. It has given her something to live for.

"I hear you have moved house," she says.

"I meant to say."

"Tilly visited last week. I'm glad I wasn't knocked down by a bus. They wouldn't have known where to take my remains."

"Don't be silly," I say. "the phone number hasn't changed."

"Oh, good. I'll have it tattooed on my chest."

And I have this image in my head, a series of seven numbers across my mum's boobs, three numbers on one boob, 4 on the other. I blush and stand up.

The mirror above the fireplace has always been too high. You cannot make use of it unless you are a giant. I have never got around to re-positioning it.

The grandfather clock in the hall strikes four o'clock and I find the sound very comforting.

As a silence falls between us, my mother exits to collect the tea things. I pick my nose and don't know what to do with it, pushing the goo into a trouser pocket when I hear her returning.

I don't mention my book.

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I stand on the eleventh step; I have come to clear out my mother's house.

The eleventh hour of my life approaches. Am I lost or will the cavalry come charging over the hill to save me?

I have been given a professorship at Harvard. Tilly talks of staying put, of making sure that Eli settles into his first year at Bath. He is studying languages, which means nothing to me. I suppose the more we understand what others are saying, the better.

The house smells of damp.

In the kitchen my mind settle on the selection of magnets attached to the fridge. Scarborough. Blackpool. Cumbria. Majorca. There's one from Hawaii and I am puzzled, thinking, for a second, my parents had slipped away without my knowledge, then I remember it was a holiday taken by my Auntie Jessie. A premium bond win and I smile because I told her it was a clever place to put savings when interest rates were so low.

The fridge has been cleared. Mrs. Jenkins has seen to it. The bits and pieces have gone to a local food bank.

In the bedroom I pull back the curtains. I have spent too much of my time looking through windows. What would I see if I were to be standing on the eleventh step?

A middle-aged man, growing fat, who has been too frightened by life. He has not been close to anybody. He doesn't know whom to blame and then he yearns for a Scotch pie and beans. He hears his mum in the kitchen knocking about and he prays the beans have been properly heated. He pours lashings of brown sauce on the pie and his dad laughs as he does exactly the same. His mum is whistling a tune and his dad joins in with the words.

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“When I get older, losing my hair,

Many years from now. “

He finds his mum’s bed and crawls inside as if it were a long dark tunnel.

Under the duvet he sings a song from long ago.

“I want to hold your ha-and.

I want to hold your hand.”