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Opening Extract from...

The Broken Road

Written by
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*... I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

WB Yeats

One

If Ollie had been a lark, things would have been different.

He envied larks: the glow of sainthood flooded their lives. They caught the worm; they got things done. If Ollie had been a lark, he'd have been up hours before his mobile buzzed at nine o'clock. He'd already have been for a run, dashed off half a dozen paintings, and made breakfast for Jess and Flo. But Ollie was an owl, not a lark, so he reached a hand from under the duvet, slammed the phone into silence and went back to sleep.

He was sorting through the paintings stacked in the hallway when it rang again. He let himself dream of good news. That new gallery in Highgate might be offering him an exhibition. Or there was a chance the American customer had come good and wanted to commission more of his Hampstead Heath scenes. He studied the painting in his hands: an avenue of lime trees in Alexandra Park. Sunshine pierced the canopy of leaves, spreading a lacework of light on the path below. He'd painted it during a period of inspiration last summer. Jess had loved it: 'Hey, that's good!' she said. 'You've got your magic back.' She'd kissed him, the sort of kiss she used to give him when they first met.

A dog barked in the street below. A hacking, insistent noise, like a consumptive's cough. It dragged him away from that summer day made forever idyllic by his painting. Traffic noise from the Holloway Road rumbled through the open window in the kitchen; a magpie screeched in the gardens behind the flats. The mobile had stopped, but rang again almost straight away. He propped the picture in front of the others and ran into the bedroom, snatching the phone from the chest of drawers.

The screen lit up: two texts and a voicemail. He listened to the message, his father's West Country burr reverberating in his ear: *I'm in London for two days, son, staying at The Queen's in Highbury. Are you free for lunch or dinner today? And why the hell don't you answer your phone?*

The voice brought back all their disastrous meetings. What was the old man doing in London? He hardly ever left Plymouth. Mum was always asking if they could go on holiday, but, no – his precious hotel came first.

Ollie checked the time: eleven forty-five. He could make lunch. There were several pubs with lively bars near The Queen's. Noise. A buzz. That's what they needed. No chance for conversations of any significance.

He clicked on his father's name in his contact list and waited. It rang several times, and he was poised to leave a message when his father answered: 'Oliver, at last! I've been trying to get you all morning.'

Ollie gritted his teeth. 'Hi, Dad. What brings you to London?'

'Meetings, money, the usual stuff. I needed specialist advice.'

Mm. What was that about?

'So, are you going to squeeze me into your busy day or not?' his father said.

Ollie shifted the phone to the other ear. 'I can meet you

in an hour for a sandwich.'

'Oh, I was hoping ...' Disappointment puffed out of his father's voice. 'Maybe dinner tonight. Bring Jess and Flo along. Your mum told me to make sure I saw them.'

A memory snaked its way to the surface:

I'm in the cricket team this Saturday, Dad. Will you come and watch?

Sorry, son, I've got to work on these accounts.

'It will have to be lunch, I'm afraid,' Ollie said. 'There's a pub round the corner from your hotel, the Orion. How about I meet you there?'

The pub was all wooden floors, high ceilings, sofas, lots of glass. Two huge abstracts, streaks of red and mauve, dominated the walls. Ollie's watercolours wouldn't stand a chance here. He scanned the room and found his father standing at the bar. It was lined with people ordering drinks and lunch, but an oasis of calm surrounded his father. He'd always had this sort of power: people didn't jostle him, push in front, overstep the mark. There was some sort of inbuilt authority, probably a genetic bonus from his long line of hotelier ancestors. Whatever it was, Ollie hadn't inherited it.

He stared at his father's back, at the blue shirt, the immaculate grey trousers. He hadn't expected seeing him again after so long to generate such a jolt. The iron-grey hair, the square shoulders, the upright stance were unchanged. He squeezed between the knots of people.

'Hello, Dad.'

'Oliver! Good to see you. What are you drinking?' A whisky already stood on the bar.

'A lager. Thanks.' Ollie waited until the barman placed the bottle in front of him. 'Do you want to order lunch?'

His father looked up, and Ollie noticed the deep grooves running from his nose to the corners of his mouth. He didn't remember them being there before.

'No, son. Let's get out of this crush. I can't hear myself think. And as for the price of the drinks – it's daylight robbery!'

They found a table on the pavement outside the pub. It was one of those days in April when summer infiltrates spring. The sun was hot on Ollie's back. He fished in his pocket and pulled out one of Flo's scrunchies. He felt his father's eyes on him as he dragged his hair into a pony tail and fixed the band round it: he wouldn't approve. Nor would he think much of Ollie's paint-streaked T-shirt, the torn jeans, but for once he didn't say anything.

Ollie lifted the neck of the bottle to his lips, savouring the cold liquid slipping down his throat. 'Cheers, Dad. Good health.'

His father raised his glass. 'And to you, and those lovely girls of yours.' He took a sip and returned the glass to the table. 'So, how's life treating you?'

Ollie thought of the unsold paintings in the hallway of the flat. 'Yeah, it's good. Everything's good.'

What about Jess? Still slaving away in that school of hers?'

Ollie tapped the bottle against his teeth. 'She's still teaching if that's what you mean.'

'And little Flo? Not so little now, I suppose.'

'Flo's great. Doing well at school. She never seems to be at home what with drama club, choir –'

‘And you? Still daubing with the old paints?’

‘That might be how you describe it, Dad.’ If his father was trying to needle him, he’d succeeded even sooner than usual. They’d been circling this argument since Ollie’s sixteenth birthday, when his father had spread his arms wide in the hotel reception: *One day this will all be yours, son!*

‘How much money have you made this year?’ he asked now.

Ollie gulped back some lager. ‘Life’s not all about money, you know.’

His father laughed. ‘Can’t get far without it though, can we?’

Ollie rubbed his forehead and his palm felt sticky with perspiration. The money his father put into his bank account every month seemed to materialise on the table between them. What had been acceptable when he was at college didn’t sit comfortably these days.

‘How’s Mum?’ he asked.

Come and see for yourself.’

‘What about Louise? How’s she doing?’

‘She’s fine. Seems to have put all that trouble behind her at long last.’ His father gripped the edge of the table, spreading his fingers wide. ‘But let’s cut to the chase, eh?’ A line of dark hairs sprouted above the knuckles, and the familiar gold signet ring decorated the little finger of his left hand. Physically, Ollie took after his mother’s side of the family, tall, skinny, dark-haired, but his hands with their wide palms and square-tipped fingers were identical to his father’s.

‘You haven’t been down to Plymouth for over a year.’

‘Our last meeting wasn’t exactly positive, was it?’ He fixed his eyes on his father’s face. ‘I seem to remember you said, “Don’t come back until you’re ready to discuss the next steps”.’

‘It’s breaking your mother’s heart, you know.’

‘Don’t do the emotional blackmail, Dad. I phoned Mum last week, and she’s fine.’ Ollie indicated the empty glass. ‘Another one?’

His father shook his head. ‘We need to talk business. I’m sixty-four this year. I’m getting tired, and I want to secure the future of the hotel.’

‘We’ve been through this before. You know how I feel.’

His father’s fingers drummed on the table. ‘I need you down in Plymouth, Oliver. One day the hotel will be yours –’

‘No, Dad!’ Ollie had been determined to keep his cool, but the words exploded from his mouth. The couple at the next table stopped talking and stared at him. ‘I’ve told you. I’m not interested in running the hotel.’

‘The South-West is renowned for its light. You could do a bit of painting on the side.’

‘I don’t want to do *a bit of painting*. I’m an artist; it’s all I’ve ever wanted to be.’

‘It’s your inheritance, Oliver. The hotel has been in the Anderson family for generations, father to son, father to son. You’re my first born –’

‘You’ve only got one child, Dad.’

‘What are you talking about? There’s you and Louise.’

‘The hotel has always been the only child you care about.’

‘Just because I took my responsibilities seriously. I regarded running the hotel as an honour and a privilege.’

‘Even at the expense of your family?’

‘You’re thirty-nine –’

‘Thanks, Dad. I’m well aware of my age.’

‘Come and join me in the hotel.’ Beads of sweat on his top lip were the only sign his father was agitated. ‘I can pay you a proper salary, show you the ropes, and when the time comes, you’ll be ready to take over.’

Ollie thumped his balled fists against his knees. ‘You haven’t listened to anything I’ve said. You can’t ride roughshod over other people’s feelings.’

‘I could have been all sorts of things. I was good at science. I’d like to have been an engineer.’

‘Then you should understand what it means to feel passionate about something.’

‘What I understand is duty. I promised your grandfather on his deathbed that I’d pass the hotel to you, his namesake. And it’s your duty –’

‘You can’t promise on someone else’s behalf, Dad.’

‘A deathbed promise is sacred. I can still hear your grandfather’s voice now: *Another Oliver Anderson to take over the hotel. I can die in peace.* You’re asking me to break that.’

‘And you’re trying to make me to feel guilty about something that was nothing to do with me.’ Ollie jumped up, his hand knocking against the bottle. It crashed on the ground, and the glass splintered. ‘I’m not taking on the hotel, Dad. Sell it. Do whatever.’

His father looked up at him, grey eyes glinting in the sunlight. ‘I can’t believe it’s come to this. I always told your mother you’d see sense one day.’

‘Leave Mum out of it. Just because she’s had to do as she’s told, doesn’t mean I have to.’

His father stood up and faced him across the table. ‘You’ll regret that.’

Ollie dragged the band from his pony tail and shook his hair free. ‘I doubt I will, Dad. And you needn’t bother with the allowance any more. I don’t want your money.’

The silence grew around them and he sensed other people’s eyes on them. His father’s fists were clenching and unclenching. Their stares locked for several seconds. Then Ollie pushed back his chair and walked away.

Two

Matt turned out his bedside light. ‘Goodnight, beautiful.’

Louise reached over and kissed his shoulder. ‘I won’t be long.’ She tucked the duvet round her and balanced her notepad on her knees. An orange glow from her reading lamp pinpointed her list for the next day, her second wedding anniversary: (1) early morning run (2) coffee with Emily (3) buy Matt’s present (4) new dress.

Every moment had to be planned in meticulous detail. When things got out of control, the mess could suffocate you. In the drawer of her desk, she kept hard-backed A5 jotters, one for each of the last four years. What had started as a safety rope to clutch through the turmoil had become

a necessity. The notebook she'd begun, at the counsellor's suggestion, soon after her return to Plymouth, was dark blue. The early lists were painful to read: (1) wake up (2) make a cup of tea (3) have a shower. Every tick in those days marked a triumph. The subsequent jotters were brighter, one red, another apple green, and her current one was purple with white circles. She added two more items to her list: (5) see Mum & Dad (6) dinner, pushed the notebook under her pillow, and switched off the light.

She opened her eyes, and felt the wet on her lids. She hadn't cried in the night for ages, but knew instantly what the time would be. Still, she moved her head on the pillow to see the clock. The red digits glared back at her: 03.50. Ten to four.

Matt was snoring lightly by her side. Her foot met the warmth given off by his sleeping body. Why now? When she thought she'd conquered it all. She turned on her side, and rolled into a ball, clutching her knees. The window was ajar and an occasional ripple of the curtains made her imagine a breeze on her cheeks, and the scent of the sea in her nose. She'd read a magazine article about reasons for a run of nights broken at a specific time. A portent of things to come, she recalled it saying. A whisper of the future like a sigh along a telephone wire. But the article had got it wrong. In her case, the awakening wasn't a link to the future, but a dreadful reminder.

'Louise?' Matt's voice was muffled in the duvet. 'What's up?'

She rolled onto her back. 'I thought you were asleep.'

'You've been tossing and turning for ages. What's the matter?'

She threaded her fingers between his. She loved the feel of his hands, powerful and capable, roughened by his passion for woodwork. They made her feel safe, like her father's did. Eugene's hands were slim, his fingers long and tapering: she should have taken more notice.

'I don't know.' She did know; of course she knew. And Matt did too, but somehow across the space between them, they'd created a shadow-world of half-truths.

He stroked her palm, moving his fingers higher and massaging her wrist.

'I'll call in for holiday brochures on the way home from work.' He moved his hand further up, and his fingers danced in her armpit. 'Sun, sea, and ...'

She pushed him off. 'That tickles!'

Matt had his heart set on a holiday on a Greek island. 'It will be romantic,' he'd said last time they discussed it. 'And we can start practising for ... you know.' She'd pulled away, wondering how the agreement to try for a baby first came about.

When she woke next, sunlight streaked across the duvet. She reached out to Matt's side of the bed – cold. A greasy film smeared the surface of a mug of tea on the bedside table. She sat up and leant against the pillows. The dreams crashed back into her brain. Glueing. Clogging. Scarring. The clock showed ten-thirty: she'd missed her run. Early morning was best: her legs powering along Hoe Road, Grand Parade, the Mayflower Steps. Back again. Today her limbs felt leaden.

She stared at the painting on the wall opposite, a view of The Hoe and Plymouth Sound her brother had painted and sent to her and Matt as a wedding present. He knew it was

her favourite spot, and at the time, she'd thought it was a peace-offering. Despite everything, she missed him.

It was cool in the bedroom, and goose bumps prickled her arms. She pulled the duvet up to her chin and heard a thunk as something slid to the floor. Glancing over the edge of the bed, she saw the rectangle of white on the pale grey carpet, and next to it, a small package with rose-decorated wrapping paper. She reached down and clutched at the envelope. Pulling the card free, she ran her fingers over the raised velvet heart, adorned with silver glitter and minute red jewels. She opened the card:

*Every day in every way
I love you more and more.
Your beauty makes my heart race
Without you I'd be sore.
I can't believe that you are mine
But I am yours for sure.*

Underneath the rhyme in Matt's untidy scrawl, it said: *With all my love, my darling wife on our special day. Your loving husband.*

Matt's cards were always effusive: lots of hearts and flowers, rhymes expressing his love. He was a 'doing' man as he liked to say, happiest sanding a plank of pine for their new living room floor, sailing his dinghy, going to the gym. She'd rarely seen him read a book. So, his attempts at poetry touched her immeasurably, but sometimes she would have welcomed an elegant, restrained card, with the simple message *I love you, Matt*.

Emily was in the coffee shop when Louise arrived. She beckoned and pointed to the coffee and croissants on the table. Louise hung her jacket on the back of the chair and leaned forward to kiss Emily's cheek. 'What happened to the diet?'

Emily took a large bite from her croissant, a smudge of chocolate lingering on her top lip. 'We're celebrating! I've got news.'

Louise sat down. Emily was always celebrating something and it usually involved cake. Theirs was an unlikely friendship, but they'd known each other since primary school, and when Louise first returned from London, Emily's undemanding chatter had been like a warm blanket round her chilled frame.

Louise sipped her coffee. 'What are we celebrating?' 'I'm twelve weeks!' Emily's hands curved round her stomach. 'I've been dying to tell you, but David said I had to wait.'

Louise felt a hole open up inside her, a cavity where maggots crawled. 'Congratulations! That's wonderful news.' She stretched her face into what she hoped resembled a smile.

'Oh, God, I'm so sorry.' Emily reached for her hand. 'I can't believe I sprang it on you like that.'

'Don't be silly.' Louise managed another smile, a better one this time. 'You don't have to wrap me in cotton wool. Tell me all about it.'

By the time she escaped from Emily, her head was thudding. She walked to the shopping arcade and bought painkillers

from the chemist. She sank onto a chair and downed three tablets. These last few months, she'd felt so much better, Matt's love a cocoon of security. She wouldn't let Emily's news push her off course.

She pulled her notebook from her bag. Only one item on the list achieved so far. She glanced at her watch: already gone midday. She had to pass the outdoor pursuits shop on the way home, so she could get the new anorak Matt wanted then. It wasn't a very romantic present, especially when she compared it to the jade earrings he'd bought for her, so perhaps she'd buy him a new shirt as well. And she'd seen a green dress that she knew would look good against her dark hair and olive skin.

She was in the middle of paying for the dress when her phone rang.

The assistant hesitated. 'Do you need to get that?' Louise pushed her credit card into the slot. 'I'll ring back in a minute.'

The assistant layered white tissue paper over the dress and folded it carefully. 'It's a wonderful outfit,' she said as Louise tapped in her pin number. 'The silk material hangs beautifully, and of course you've got the figure for it.' She slipped it into a carrier bag, which she sealed with white ribbon. 'Your husband is going to love it.'

Louise smiled. While she'd been trying on outfits, she'd confided in the assistant that it was her anniversary. As she replaced the credit card in her wallet, her phone started up again.

'Someone's keen to get hold of you.' The assistant's mouth curled in a smirk. 'Hubby, I expect.'

Louise snatched up the carrier bag from the counter. 'Thanks for your help.' She'd reached the door when the phone stopped and then rang again immediately. Stepping onto the pavement, she clicked accept. 'Mum, what's the panic? I was going to phone –'

'It's your dad!'

'What? What's happened?'

'He's collapsed.'

It seemed to Louise that she'd stepped into the road, heard car horns blaring, dodged the motorbike bearing down on her. But when her brain cleared, she was still standing outside the dress shop, gripping the carrier bag.

'Where is he? Can he talk?'

'He's on the sofa.' Her mother began to cry. 'I think he's unconscious.'

'Phone the ambulance!' Louise heard herself shrieking.

'An ambulance now!'

The assistant in the shop must have been watching. She appeared on the pavement next to Louise. 'Here, come back inside. You're as white as a sheet.'

'I need a taxi!'

The woman's eyes widened.

'Please, ring for a taxi for me.'