

Playing with the Moon

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Extract

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One

Minna

Our second wedding anniversary. I'm about to tell Tom our marriage is over when he spots something in the sand.

His brow crinkles. 'What the hell's that?'

'What's what?' My heart gives a little jump: half irritation, half relief he's interrupted the conversation. He springs to his feet and walks towards the rocks through the seaweed and driftwood blown up by last week's storm. The sun comes out and something glints on the sand below us, now smooth as a linen tablecloth. I screw up my eyes to try and make out the object. Bottle top? Coin? I get up and follow him, feet scrunching over the shingle until I reach the sandy foreshore.

Tom holds out his hand. 'Stay there.' The firmness in his voice makes me blink.

'What's the matter?'

He crouches, his back to me, and digs with both hands like a dog. 'Oh God.' His hands cease their movement.

'What?'

'You might not want to see . . .' I push past his restraining arm and see what he's dug up: a long white object. A bone. The metallic thing lies about a foot away from it.

'Is it human?' I lean closer.

'Probably just a sheep, or cow.' But I can hear hesitation in his voice. My knowledge of anatomy is shaky but I know this isn't animal; it's a human leg bone. Tom digs a little more and exposes a row of ivory-coloured arches. A ribcage.

'Jesus!'

His arm curls round me, pulling me away. 'Don't look. Go and ring the police.'

I nod. As I stand I catch sight of the coin again. Only it isn't a

coin, but two strips of rusty metal hanging from a metal chain. Dog-tags, like you see in old black-and-white war films. I pick them up and rub at the inscription on one of them with my handkerchief. LEWIS J CAMPBELL and a number.

‘So they’ll be able to identify him.’ Something starts to prickle behind my eyelids. I blink and look away, passing the tags to Tom. So ridiculous to feel this emotion for someone so long dead. ‘Poor, poor man, whoever he is.’

‘Are you all right?’ His tone expresses just the right amount of concern: not enough to show me he’s worried but not so little he could be accused, or accuse himself, of callousness. He walks this fine line with me the whole time.

‘I’ll go and make that call.’ I remember something. ‘We probably shouldn’t touch anything.’

‘God, no, you’re right.’ We’ve watched enough crime drama to know about not disturbing bodies. He drops the tags and they clatter onto the vertebrae. I shudder. ‘Sorry,’ he says.

I stand and walk across the shingle to my rucksack and push the nines on the mobile. Lucky the signal’s good down here, one reason why we chose Rosebank House for the summer. Tom would be in trouble if his clients couldn’t get him round the clock.

The emergency services woman with the slow rolling burr permits herself little animation at the news and asks us to wait on the beach for the police.

‘Quite exciting really,’ I tell Tom in a bright voice.

He stares at me. ‘If you say so.’

What a crass thing to say. He was probably thinking about the last time we waited for the emergency services. I fiddle with my wedding ring, now loose on my finger. I’ve had to stop wearing my engagement ring, it kept sliding off.

I haven’t bought him a card for our anniversary. He laid a big bunch of delphiniums on the breakfast table for me this morning – safe flowers because we didn’t have them at our wedding or the cremation.

He sits down on the sand beside me again and I see a tiny vein

pulsing in his neck. Only months ago I'd have longed to kiss it. Now I observe it and feel nothing. Below us waves hiss incessantly onto the sand. 'We need to talk,' I say. It's killing him, living with me. It can't go on.

Blue lights flash above us by the old pillbox on the cliff.

'Rough seas in these parts a month or so back,' the sergeant tells us. 'Bad spring storms. Probably eroded some of the sand so the body rose to the surface again.'

'Else he was stuck on those rocks till the waves pushed him off,' offers the constable, pointing towards the jagged stones that mark the end of the cove.

The sergeant sniffs to show what he thinks of that idea. 'No skull. Lucky for us that dog-tag's still with the bones. Should make it easier to work out who he is.'

'Do you think he's local?' I ask.

The sergeant turns his head. 'The ID looks American to me. Lots of Yanks were camped round here, especially early in 1944.'

'He probably drowned in some training fiasco,' Tom says.

The constable frowns at Tom. 'That an Ulster accent, Mr Byrne?'

I stiffen, a reflex action from back when I used to feel protective towards Tom. 'He's British.'

'I grew up in Belfast.' Tom's accent is slight now; the local bobby has sharp ears. Tom's probably trying to work out whether it's good or bad I stood up for him.

The sergeant picks up his radio. 'No point us all hanging round down here, this chap's been dead a good few years. Expect you'd like to get on with your holiday, Mr and Mrs Byrne.'

And the use of our married titles reminds me of the conversation I was starting when Tom spotted the bones. Tom sees me flinch and I blush. This sequence of reactions surprises me – it's been weeks since I felt anything at all.

Swanham Herald

Dead Fontwell Soldier was American

Holidaymakers have discovered the remains of an American GI, sixty years after he drowned. American military officials have confirmed his identity as Private Lew Campbell, believed to have died in 1944 during training exercises for the Normandy Landings.

The body was found on Tuesday in Fontwell Cove, five miles east of Lulworth. Police believe recent rough weather and cliff erosion dislodged it from a resting place further along the coast.

Fontwell lies on MOD land and was evacuated in November 1943 so it could be used as a training ground for the invasion of Europe. Its former inhabitants never returned to the village. The land is open to the public at set dates in the year.

MOD and Foreign Office officials are attempting to trace any surviving family of Private Campbell in his home state of Georgia. It is likely the body will be buried in the American War Cemetery at Madingley, Cambridgeshire.

Two

Felix

Something thuds beside Felicity.

She turns to see a boy dribbling a football the colour of a ripe damson towards his brother. For a second she thinks they're kicking Lew's swollen head across the grass. She clutches the wall while the world spins. Damn. She's been an idiot, coming back here.

When the spell passes she's relieved to see that nobody is looking in her direction – invisibility is one of the advantages of ageing.

And of course there's no black man lying there, head bloodied and bruised, one hand still raised in an attempt to protect himself. Just two small boys with their football, enjoying a perfect summer afternoon among the crumbling walls of the village.

Ever since she read that newspaper article she's started seeing Lew again. He appears on the end of her bed, calling her name until she wakes. She thought she'd put a stop to that years ago. 'Go away,' she told him last night. He said nothing, never does. Just looked at her with those coal-black eyes.

Nearly time to go. The village only opens for set hours on set days. If you outstay these times you run the risk of being shelled or shot. Felicity, known to her friends as Felix, is relieved, even though she's driven all the way down from the North to see this place, renting a cottage nearby so she can return to Fontwell as often as she wants. The village is open every day during the summer months.

Someone calls the football-playing boys. She sees a woman wearing a floating, bohemian-looking skirt and a top in pale colours, long gold hair dropping over milky shoulders. She reminds Felix of Isabel, but of course the woman is just a holidaymaker keen to see the local sights. Nothing more romantic than an abandoned village.

'Not sure you should be playing football here.' The floaty woman picks up their ball and throws her an apologetic glance. Felix smiles

to show she doesn't mind: Sam and his brother always kicked balls around on this sward of green. She can't bear to have the village thought of as a museum.

She wanders back to the car park and sits for a minute in her Vauxhall, eyes closed, deciding whether or not she can go through with the next part of her pilgrimage. Perhaps it would be better to return to the holiday cottage. She's visited her mother's grave, now completely given over to grass, bindweed and sticky-willy, so there's really no need to linger in Fontwell. The pretty woman and her boys return to their Volvo and drive off. They'll sit outside some picturesque cottage, drinking tea and lemonade and planning the next day's trip.

What the hell. She's come all this way so she may as well see the old place. She starts the engine and drives through the village. Rosebank now lies outside the restricted area; the Ministry of Defence has decided it no longer needs the parish in its entirety. She waves to the soldier at the barrier and watches him lower it behind her – last one out. Just like 1943.

Felix takes her foot off the brake. The village is left to itself, with only its memories and the intermittent thumping of guns for company. She turns up the track to the house. They've restored it now. Apparently it wasn't as badly damaged by mortars and shelling as the other houses and the MOD kept the roof repaired over the years, possibly considering it suitable for officer accommodation. But now they've sold Rosebank House and the land around it to a local environmental charity, the Barrows Trust, which in turn has paid a holiday rental company to let it. The first visitors have already arrived.

When Felix rented her own holiday cottage she told the lady at the booking office she used to live in Rosebank. Mrs Ogle had insisted on shutting up her office for an afternoon to show her round.

'You must be aching to see your old home.'

Felix wasn't sure she was aching at all. Dreading it, more like. 'Won't the people renting it mind?'

‘I’ll ask. They’re a nice young couple.’

And they didn’t mind, even suggesting an afternoon when they’d be out.

Felix has to control her hands and feet to prevent them from braking and turning the car round. She remembers taking a ferry from Poole to Cherbourg once, years ago. She’d had to sit in her stuffy cabin until they were safely out to sea, fearing that she might look back at the receding cliffs and recognize Fontwell’s cove. So silly.

The trust has resurfaced the drive. In Felix’s day the potholes destroyed the suspensions of several cars. The large chestnut tree in the field has survived the mortars. So have the two elms. The drive bends to allow the first glimpse of the house. How small it looks in comparison with her home in Harrogate. She’s remembered it as a large place, looming over her.

A silver Mercedes sits outside. Felix parks next to it, noting how shabby her ten-year-old Vauxhall looks in comparison. Renovations on the house have only just finished: a final skipload of old bricks and timbers awaits collection. The new windowpanes still bear their manufacturers’ stickers, and paint pots and brushes sit in cardboard boxes by the door.

She walks to the front of the house, peering up at first-floor windows until she works out which was hers: the one underneath the left-hand gable. She used to climb down the wisteria – lucky she was a skinny girl – and jump down to the lawn. The wisteria has long since withered away and the exterior walls are a darker colour than the cream she remembers. But this is still unmistakably the house her doctor father bought in June 1933 to accommodate the family he imagined would keep on growing.

Felix realizes she’s staring at something small and shiny in the skip and pulls it out. A miniature brandy bottle, label long since gone. She replaces it, feeling a band tighten across her brow. To distract herself she turns to examine the flowerbeds. Could any of the roses have survived the half century and more? A naive hope. Anyway, her father tore Tricolore de Flandre, Félicité Parmentier

and Madame Hardy out when they were Digging for Victory. These lupins and stocks are new, tender green leaves curling up from weed-less compost. Perfect. Felix shivers.

‘Here you are!’ Mrs Ogle bustles in from the back garden, a slim woman in her early fifties in Armani or another of those Italian designers. Felix smooths down her own aqua-coloured linen dress, which looked so good in the shop in Harrogate but creased badly in the car. ‘Nice young couple have taken the house. He’s in PR and she’s an interior designer. Or was.’ She lowers her voice. ‘Something went wrong, I gather. They want seclusion, he told me.’ Her eyes glitter, obviously conjecturing about what had happened to the unnamed couple. ‘No dogs and no children. Ideal first tenants for Rosebank.’

No dogs, no children. Felix remembers the quiet Sunday afternoons of her childhood when she longed for pets and siblings to help pass the hours. If she hadn’t had David to play with, she’d have been a lonely girl. And David was fifteen minutes’ walk away, hardly on her doorstep.

Mrs Ogle unlocks the front door. ‘Let me show you inside.’

‘It’s kind of you to take the time,’ Felix murmurs, wishing she could think of some emergency requiring her immediate departure.

‘Shame for you to come all this way without seeing your old home. And we’re so pleased with how the refurbishment’s gone.’ Mrs Ogle gives the entrance hall wall a pat. ‘This is a proud moment for local people. We had to fight off the developers, you know.’

Felix shudders at the thought of caravan parks or retirement villages.

‘And they’ve still got their eyes on the next tranche of land.’

‘There’s more to be released?’

‘That little hamlet just before you reach the crossroads.’

Felix remembers. ‘That’s Upper Farm. Or was.’

‘The farmhouse has almost completely crumbled away now and the remaining farm buildings aren’t much to look at, rusty corrugated-iron barns.’

‘The old Squire always wanted to renovate them. But events overtook him.’

Mrs Ogle shakes her head and smooths out an imaginary crease in her skirt. ‘Property companies would love to build a little executive housing estate up there.’

‘Heaven preserve us.’

Mrs Ogle gives her an approving nod. ‘How old were you when you left Fontwell?’

‘Thirteen.’

She sighs. ‘It must have been a wrench? Will you move back down here now?’

Felix smiles to avoid answering. Mrs Ogle, more sensitive than her cheerful exterior suggests, takes her hesitation for emotion.

She nods towards the back garden. ‘I’m going to check the gardener’s tidied the shed. Call me when you’re finished and I’ll lock up.’

The entrance hall is camomile instead of the pea-green Felix remembers. The floor tiles have been restored – blacks and whites, like a chessboard. An image of Lew standing beside Isabel, so dark against her fairness, floats into her mind. She walks through the hall to the back of the house, catching glimpses of terracotta sofas, stripped floorboards and caramel walls in the drawing room, which used to be the dining room. A large flat-screen television occupies the space where the piano used to stand, a black vase or ornament on the shelf above it. Felix doesn’t bother going in to have a closer look; even in its transformed state the old dining room reminds her of silent meals with her widowed father. She continues up the corridor.

The old parlour, used only for waiting patients and Sunday callers, is now a study, with beech desk and grey office-chair. Smart. Neat piles of papers cover the desk. Felix sits for second and imagines herself writing letters or phoning friends in here, gazing at the crumbling church tower through the waving branches, a view that’s hardly changed at all in more than half a century. Her gaze drops back to the desk, to the photograph of the young man and

woman. The woman has eyes the colour of ground coffee and a shock of wavy chestnut hair. The man's arm drapes her slender shoulders and his smile is proud.

Without really knowing where she wants to look, Felix wanders into the kitchen, all cream-painted cupboards and granite: light and airy, instead of the dark, womb-like space she spent so many evenings in.

What a relief to see the renovators haven't knocked into Mrs Derby's pantry – cooler and larger than any fridge. So many younger people don't understand about pantries. She opens one of the cupboard doors and admires the neat stacks of white china plates and bowls. Then she remembers the couple renting the house and blushes. What the hell would they think if they knew she was going through their cupboards? Very trusting of Mrs Ogle to let her wander around alone.

The builders have taken out the wall between the surgery and the conservatory, creating a single room big enough to act as a dining room, with small sofas and table at the garden end. If she lived here Felix would spend all summer in this room, with its newly exposed beams and creamy walls.

A chrome light-switch reminds her that electricity now reaches this house, in place of the gas that used to light the lamps in her day. How her father would have relished such bright light at the flick of a switch, the luxury of examining patients and writing up notes without eye-strain. But electric lights wouldn't give out the warm and hissing glow that kept her company through winter nights in the kitchen, while the wireless blared out Tommy Handley. And Felix knows the night-time dark outside will still be absolute: a darkness that could contain anything.

'Get a grip, woman,' she mutters to herself. 'Johnson's been dead for years now.'

She's moved into what was once the dispensary, now a utility room, spick and span and ready for use. The tiles she remembers still line the walls, white and clinical, and these must be the same old pine shelves her father put up to store his bottles and packets. The

chemist in Swanham supplied his patients satisfactorily, but Dr Valance liked to keep some essential medicines in the house, especially when petrol became scarce and was reserved for emergency trips. These days the authorities would have a fit if they found a doctor was keeping so many drugs on his premises. She runs a hand along the bottom shelf, not certain what she's searching for. Not brandy bottles, not this time.

Her fingers touch paper jammed up against the wall in the far corner. She pulls out a small yellowed sheet. She blows on it and the dust disperses to expose a cormorant, poised to dive, head slightly tilted, eyes intent on its prey. Seeing the bird is like receiving an electric shock; she remembers Lew drawing it as though it was yesterday.

Felix slides the drawing back onto the shelf. It belongs in Rosebank House, with the girl she once was. Away from the valley, it would disintegrate. After all, she did.