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Burial

Neil Cross

1

The doorbell rang.

Nathan had a feeling – but he dismissed it, muted the TV and went to the door. There stood Bob; hunched over, grinning in the darkness and rain. Saying: 'Hello, mate.'

Nathan said, 'How did you find me?'

'I looked.'

Nathan tried to slam the door, but Bob put out a big hand, stopping it. Then he removed the hand and said, 'They're digging up the woods.'

'They're what?'

'Digging up the woods.'

'Why?'

'Does it matter? They're building a housing estate.'

'Of course it doesn't matter. What kind of housing estate?'

'The kind people live in. Are you actually listening?'

'Yes. Yeah, of course.'

Nathan glanced backwards, as if somebody was standing at his shoulder. But nobody was; it was Tuesday night. That meant Holly would be back late.

He said, 'Look. Give me a call. Phone me at work.'

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'I'm here. Right now.'

'You can't come in. I'll meet you somewhere. Tomorrow.'

'I'll be gone in two minutes.'

'My wife will be home.'

But Bob just stood there, waiting in the rain. So Nathan gathered his breath and moved aside. Bob stepped over the threshold and stood dripping on the wooden floor.

He'd noticed the many framed photographs that hung in the hallway.

Nathan waited while Bob took a squinting step forward, examining the photographs more closely. A baby girl, naked on a towel. A gap-toothed girl with a pageboy haircut. The fringe was blunt and a bit crooked – obviously trimmed by her mother. A holiday photograph in which the girl was a very young teenager, her hair short and bleached and spiky. She stood on the deck of a boat, wearing an orange life jacket. She was holding up a long, silver mackerel. In that photograph, she was laughing.

Bob looked at the photographs for a long time.

When he turned to Nathan, his voice had gone.

'What the fuck is this?'

'I told you not to come in.'

Using the wall for balance, Bob lowered himself. He sat on the stripped Victorian floorboards. He looked wrong, like an optical illusion, like a drawing where the perspective and the scale have been altered.

Fingertips brushed the hair on Nathan's nape.

In the living room, the TV flickered – and it seemed to Nathan that the lights dimmed, and flickered, then rose again.

2

Nathan and Bob had met fifteen years before, in the summer of 1993.

Nathan was renting a small room in a house on Maple Road. A year after leaving university, he was claiming benefit and waiting to be awarded a job on the city's biweekly listings magazine. The magazine had yet to bother rejecting his unsolicited job applications, or any of his unsolicited gig, film and record reviews. Nathan was encouraged by this lack of explicit rejection: his plan was to sit around and keep applying.

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Because all the rooms in 30 Maple Road were rented out, there was no communal space in which to gather. So Nathan and his housemates spent the dole days drifting from bedroom to bedroom, drinking lots of Happy Shopper tea.

That afternoon, Pete's room was pretty quiet: from it there emerged only the earthquake throb of an E-string fed through a large amplifier and a digital delay pedal.

Nathan lay in bed, listening to it. Then he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, put on his trousers and a washed-out band T-shirt, and wandered across the mangy hallway.

Because Pete had lived in the house the longest, he'd graduated to the biggest room. In it, an old mattress doubled as a sofa. The sofa had been rescued from a skip outside next-door's house. Propped against the wall was a monumental, patched-together stereo – assembled from gaffer-taped components joined by coloured leads and soldered interconnects.

Pete always had people in his room. Often, they were members of what was still called the convoy – patchouli-ripe crusties who told endless dull tales of the Battle of the Beanfield. There were Goths, too, and sometimes ravers, a youth culture for which Nathan didn't much care. There were oblique Rastafarians, a benevolent hippie called Fuzzy Rob, a speed-dealing biker called Carnie Frank, a morbidly obese West Indian truck driver called Reds. There were dangerous-looking, sarcastic men in baggy old jeans and prison tattoos.

But this afternoon, there was just a big, scruffy, feline man lolling on one of the old sofas. He wore an ivory shirt, a navy-blue suit threadbare at the cuffs and long, knotty hair that might have been backcombed since last being washed.

Nathan nodded hello and sat on the floor, hugging his bony knees. The stranger put a Bic flame to the end of a John Player Special. When it was lit, he leaned forward to offer Nathan his hand.

'Bob.'

Nathan shook the hand. It was very big. Shaking hands made Nathan self-conscious, like a kid playing grown-ups.

Pete sat cross-legged beneath the monstrous, teetering stereo. He wore a matted red dressing gown and dirty white socks.

Bob had a leather briefcase with him; scuffed at the seams, perhaps a lucky find in a charity shop. From it, he withdrew a Dictaphone, which he put on the floor in front of Pete, saying: 'Shall we get on?'

Nathan said, 'So, what's this all about?'

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Bob was producing a spiral-bound reporter's notebook and a chewed-up Bic. 'A friend of a friend put me in contact with Pete. He's agreed to be interviewed.'

'For what?'

'My research.'

'Cool. Are you a journalist?'

'No. It's just research.'

'For ...?'

'My PhD.'

Nathan looked from one to the other and back again; at big-handed, cumbersome Bob – and Pete in his tatty scarlet dressing gown.

He said, 'Really?'

'Really.'

'What are you researching? Music?'

Music was Pete's only interest – music and a girl called Emma, who'd dumped him eighteen months ago.

Bob gave Nathan an imperious look, and Pete stepped in: 'He wants to know about my brother.'

'Mate, I didn't even know you had a brother.'

'That's the point.'

'So, what? Is he inside or something? Like, all black sheep and shit.'

Bob said, 'If you would,' meaning Shut the fuck up, please. He turned to Pete. 'Would you prefer to be alone for this?'

'Nah. Nathan can sit in. If he's into it.'

Nathan was into it.

Bob told him, 'If you stay, please don't interrupt. Please don't ask any questions.'

'All right. Whatever. Jesus.'

Bob leaned a little towards the Dictaphone and said, 'July 4th, 1993. 1.30 p.m. The subject is Pete King, aged ...'

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'Twenty-four.'

'Pete King. Aged twenty-four.'

For a moment, Nathan thought Pete was about to start giggling. But instead he sat up – cross-legged and straight-backed – and began to talk.

Bob: So, when are we talking about?

Pete: Summer, 1981. June or July or something. I think it was June.

And your older brother?

David, his name was. We lived out in the country – our dad had a farm. When I was little, I used to follow our David round. He showed me all these secret places. He called me a limpet; but he didn't mind, not really – not even when I went off alone to have a gander at his jazz mags.

[Laughter]

There was all these knackered old Men Onlys and Razzles and Clubs. He had them stashed in an old box between the roots of this massive old yew tree, right on the edge of our dad's land, down by the river. It must've been five hundred years old, that tree, and our David used it to stash dirty magazines.

And how old were you – when David died?

Twelve, I suppose. Twelve, going on thirteen.

What happened?

It was stupid, really. He was helping our dad fix the bailer. It was Friday afternoon and he was in too much of a hurry. He got his arm caught, then it was ripped out of the socket. Our dad was with him. He ran off to call the ambulance, but by the time it gets there, our David's dead.

And how did you feel about that?

I don't know how I felt about it, really. It was all a bit weird. Shock, or whatever. Our mum was crying and our dad was drinking, and all these aunties and uncles and neighbours and Granddad and Grandma were round. It was sort of like I wasn't there.

What happened next?

Well, they buried him.

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Did you attend the funeral?

Yeah. But I didn't think that much of it. I'm sitting on this bloody pew in a suit, all tight round the collar. And nobody's said two proper words to me about him. It's a really hot day. You remember that summer – they had all the riots, St Paul's, Toxteth, Brixton and wherever.

So anyway. On the way home in the car, I'm not speaking. I don't cry or nothing; I just don't speak. And as soon as the car pulls up outside the farm, I run inside. Our mum's got this big spread laid out. Sandwiches and that – pork pies, this massive ham.

Our dad comes up to me and says, Don't do this to your mother, not today of all days.

So I start crying and run upstairs. I'm so pissed off, I don't know what to do. So I start looking round for something to smash. I want to break something – something I really care about. Does that make sense?

It's very common.

Anyway. I'm standing in the middle of my bedroom, fists all clenched, and I think: the Specials.

Our David had been to see them – in Bristol, at the Locarno, in 1980. He'd hung round outside and got the album signed. Not Terry Hall – but Neville had his name on there, and Roddy Radiation. It was David's most treasured thing, and I'd always wanted it. I used to nick it, hide it among my records. I only had about five – Top of the Pops and Disney songs and that – so he always found it, easy. So anyway. I go to David's bedroom and I kneel down, and there it is – the most precious thing in his world, the first Specials album, signed by Neville Staple and Roddy Radiation.

I had it in my hands – I was going to snap it – when I see something in the wardrobe mirror. I look up, thinking it must be our dad and I'm in deep shit. But it's not our dad. It's our David.

Your brother David?

My dead brother David, yeah.

What was he doing?

Just sort of sitting there. Smiling at me.

Did he speak?

He didn't need to. It was the kindest smile I ever saw. Like he knew exactly what I was doing, and why I was doing it. The funny thing is, the first thing I thought to do

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was to put the record back where it belongs. So I do that, and when I look up, our David's gone.

What happened next?

I sit there on the edge of the bed, next to where David had been. Then go down to the wake and say sorry to our mum and dad. They were all right about it.

Did you mention seeing David?

No need.

Had anything like this happened to you before?

No.

And since?

No.

One last question. What was David wearing?

[Pause]

I don't know. I can't even remember. How weird is that?

Bob sat back on the sofa, pocketing the Dictaphone.

Pete relit the skinny joint he'd allowed to go out.

Nathan said, 'Blimey.'

Pete puffed and exhaled, saying, 'Freaky or what?'

The door creaked loudly and Nathan's heart exploded in his chest. He looked over his shoulder, at the door, saying, 'Christ. I'm getting the fear.'

Bob told him, 'Sometimes, telling these stories acts as a kind of evocation.'

'Evocation of what?'

'I don't know. Whatever.'

Nathan's feet were cold. The worn carpet was bitty on his soles. He said, 'What are you talking about?'

'I'm doing ghosts.'

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'Doing ghosts.'

'Studying them.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Absolutely. I'm two years into a PhD. Psychology.'

'But there's no such thing as ghosts.' He cast a quick, guilty glance at Pete. 'Sorry, mate.'

Pete shrugged, unbothered.

Bob began to pack up his briefcase, saying: 'So, is Pete lying?'

'Of course he's not.'

'Is he mad?'

'No.'

'Was he seeing things?'

'No.'

'Then what happened?'

'I don't know.'

'Nor do I. That's why I'm studying it.'

Bob stayed a little while longer. They drank a cup of tea and Pete played his band's demo. Bob nodded along and seemed to approve; he promised to come to Pete's next gig. They all knew he wouldn't. Then he thanked Pete and told Nathan it had been good to meet him.

Bob said, 'See you later, then.'

Nathan thought: Not if I see you first. But he said: 'You must have an idea – you must have an opinion.'

'On what?'

'On what they are. Ghosts.'

'They're any number of things. Illusion, delusion, hallucination. Electromagnetic phenomena dicking around with the temporal lobe. Infra-sound. All of the above,

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and more. Not many people know this, but most ghosts are spectres of the living. The ghost of a living person is called a fetch.'

'A fetch.'

'A fetch.'

'Yeah, right.'

'It's true,' said Bob, with the briefcase in his hand.

He said goodbye, and they heard him stomp down the stairs – then the creak and slam of the front door.

'Fuck me,' said Nathan. 'Where did you find him?'

They laughed.

On the bass, Pete banged out the riff from Ghostbusters.

Nathan said, 'Is it true? What you told him?'

He didn't see Bob again for four and a half years.

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