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Extract

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Departure

Three things happened when I was seven years old.

In the spring I learnt how to spell my full name. It took weeks, but when I'd finally grasped all fifteen letters I wrote them wherever I could – in books, on furniture, on my plate in ketchup, on my arms in biro, in spit on windowpanes. Once I etched my name above the skirting board in the downstairs loo. My mother never found it, but I knew it was there. I'd sit, swing my legs, and eye my handiwork under the sink. It shone out in blue wax crayon.

Then in the summer I burned. I'd spent the day in the garden, digging for worms. The paving slabs were too hot to walk on and the shed roof softened. By evening I was scarlet. She lowered me into a cool bath and dabbed on calamine lotion, but still I wailed. For three days I couldn't sleep. I was feverish, grizzly, and the bed sheets stuck to my blisters. Two weeks later more freckles appeared.

And ten days before Christmas I lost her.

What do I remember? Every little thing. From my frayed pyjama bottoms to the eerie blue light that city rain

brought with it. You don't forget. For twenty-one years I've picked away at my memory of it, lifting up moments, testing myself. Believing I might have finally healed to a neat, white scar.

I know it was a Friday. That I woke to a quiet house. That when I crept downstairs the mail was still on the doormat and the milk in the fridge was yellow. The kitchen curtains hadn't been opened yet.

My mother was curled up on the sofa under the patchwork rug. I shifted from foot to foot, saw the tissue in her hand, the full ashtray. She smelt of jasmine. She always did. In my mind it was her scent, as if somehow she made it.

And I thought it strange that the dustmen hadn't been yet. They always came on Fridays. I liked the rattle and roar they brought with them, how they slung our rubbish with one hand, how their dustcart munched up bin bags and burped out a vegetable stench. I'd wanted to be a dustman. I'd wanted to wear a green jacket and matching cap, to hang off the side of the van as it shuddered through the streets. They would whistle and wave when they saw me. Dustmen made things better. That morning I'd wanted them there.

Perhaps I felt it. Perhaps some secret part of me knew what was to come. Can this happen? Can death be sensed, like a shift in the weather? I've wondered. In my quieter moments, when half drunk or ill or tired, I've succumbed to the notion that I could have somehow stopped the deaths – both of them. For my mother's was only the first. Another death was yet to come – a swift, snatched death. It made ditches seem darker and sleep harder to find. It meant that if the wind picked up quickly enough, and without enough warning, I'd run.

I've been looking back too much of late. New frown lines and bitten nails prove it. I've been distracted, lost, having strange dreams; I find myself gazing out of windows, listening to silence. But I have reason to now.

I have to remember everything that my mother's death led me to, as I felt it, as it took place. I have to write down every glance, each whisper in my ear. How hot that summer was. How moths bumped against the window-panes at night. How easy it was to hide in bracken. The purplish bloom of damaged skin. Nettle-rash. How a man's hand felt on me. The lies I told. The fire.

There's no doubt that there was a strange hush to the day she died; that our cold terraced house seemed to hold its breath. Later, as a teenager, I would imagine loss to act like a stone flung in a pond, sending dark waves into every distant corner. Maybe some reached me as I rested my chin on my knees in the window.

Maybe not.

At any rate, the dustmen never came.

My mother stirred at lunch time. She raked her fingers through her hair, and when I heard the front door close I scrambled up onto the windowsill so that I could see all the way to the shop. This was forbidden – I'd been told I could fall through the glass that way. But I knew she wouldn't look back to see it. She gazed up past the telegraph wires. The wind was picking up. The sky over the city was steely and low.

When she came home she carried a plastic bag, and for a while our house felt lived in again. There were noises in the kitchen. I heard the loo flush and the scuff of her slippers in the hall. In the fridge I found a bottle of milk that didn't smell sour or have lumps in, and it had a lovely bluish tinge when she slopped it into a glass for me. I

held it with both hands. She seemed well again, happier. So I went back up to my room and began digging my name into the paintwork with a penny. I felt better. The trains trundled past the end of the garden in the rain.

Four o' clock came. The clock in the hall whispered it. As I lay on the floor, fitting whole biscuits into my mouth and flicking through my comic books, the banister creaked. She trudged past my room. Twisting a strand of hair between her fingers she said, 'Are you all right in there?'

Then she ran a bath.

I loved the sound. It made me sleepy, and when I closed my eyes I'd think of magic waterfalls and little dipping boats. She always took long baths. She loved thick body creams and scented talc. She loved washing the city out of her hair and combing it as she drifted through the house, switching on lights, and she loved fluffy white towels, candles on the windowsill, water so hot there'd be a red line round her waist afterwards, and that afternoon I smelt her jasmine scent and cigarettes, heard her clothes drop to the floor, and my mother shut the bathroom door at four sixteen, as the Snow Hill to Marylebone train rolled past the house, sounding its horn into the damp air.

I know I was humming, reading my comics with my chin cupped in my hands, when she died.

Mrs Willis next door made the phone call. I stood on the back step in my dressing gown and slippers watching the frost, not wanting to go back inside. She wore a dark-red knitted cardigan with buttons that looked like boiled sweets, and she smelt of washing machines. She came out to me with the patchwork rug, knelt down and arranged

it over my shoulders. It felt heavy. She rubbed warmth into my hands, tried to smooth my hair back. She covered my ears as the sirens came, pressed me into her chest, but I still heard them.

When she went to let them in, I pattered down to the shed, tugged at the lock and crept in. My bicycle was kept in there. There were old pot plants, bricks, and a watering can. The place smelt of petrol, soil, damp wood, and I wedged myself between the wall and an old deckchair, nestled into the rug, stared at the darkness and crouched there until they'd gone.

I stayed with Mr and Mrs Willis for the next two nights – who else would have had me? I slept in their spare bedroom at the front of the house which had a fringed pink lampshade and cracks across the ceiling. At night headlights scooted over the walls, and I'd listen to the click-click of high heels on the pavement. These things were new to me, because I'd only known the back of the house before. But I could still hear tomcats yowling on fence tops. Freight trains still rumbled like thunder through the dark.

Mrs Willis didn't stray far. She turned up radiators, told me Bible stories, brought me boiled egg and soldiers, sat on the end of my bed and patted my feet, and one night, when she thought I was sleeping, she whispered about me on the telephone. I hugged my shins at the top of the stairs and picked at the leafy wallpaper. I was being taken away. I didn't know where to, or how long for, but I knew I'd never sit at the top of Mrs Willis's stairs again. 'It's a four-hour journey!' she hissed into the phone. 'Can't I drive her there? The child's seven years old, for pity's sake!'

Next morning it was explained. Mrs Willis said she was too old to keep me, and Mr Willis was older still.

He was poorly, she told me, and needed rest. I knew this anyway, because he never seemed to leave the faded armchair that faced the back garden, and he watched the bird table with watery eyes, coughing into a wad of cotton wool. I only ever used to see him when I went round to get my ball back – a waxy, thin man with striped pyjamas, half-moon glasses and big jowls that trembled when he spoke. But for those two nights, I got to know what he smelt like, how his fingernails had a strange rind underneath them that he peeled out with toothpicks. At night, as the headlights wheeled over my head, I'd hear his breath rattle through the bedroom wall, and wonder if he'd die soon too, and who would find him.

So one slippery white-sky morning in December I was put into a car. Mrs Willis helped me. I felt like a parcel in my duffle coat and scarf, clutching Dog by the ears. My eczema itched beneath my red woollen tights. It was quiet in our street. Before shutting the car door Mrs Willis gave me a satsuma and a slice of soggy fruitcake for the journey.

'God be with you,' – she smiled – 'and try to be good.'

As the car pulled away, Mrs Willis tried to keep up. She began blowing kisses, mouthing something at me I couldn't make out. I thought maybe she'd changed her mind, that she was trying to catch me, to pop me back into the front bedroom with the frilly lampshade. I put my hand up against the glass. I willed her to run faster but she grew smaller and smaller. Through the rear window I saw her standing by the letterbox at the bottom of our street, her left arm raised with a balled-up hanky in her hand. That was the last I ever saw of her. As the car turned the corner, her white apron shone out through the gloom.

* * *

Strictly, I'm a Midlands girl. I've never been back there, and no longer see it as home, but I've not lost the accent completely. I can still describe the smell of canals in August. I like to think I still have atoms of coal dust in me, that M6 traffic fumes still inch through my veins. That if I ever walked down New Street again I'd feel like I'd never been away.

Until she died, I knew nowhere else. I'd been brought to Birmingham before I was born, before my mother knew if I was going to be a boy or a girl. She said she'd sit in the bath and watch my elbows poke up under her belly like chicken wings. We didn't live near the chocolate factory, but sometimes I was sure I could smell the cocoa beans and cream. I'd lean out of my bedroom window, close my eyes and breathe.

My weekends, when I was old enough, had been spent crawling under market stalls in the Bull Ring, chasing grimy pigeons, being pushed on the rickety swings in the park. I picked up the accent at school. I learnt football chants from the playground and bellowed them out in the bath. When I was six I sat myself down at the edge of Gas Street Basin and dipped my feet in the water, and my mother tugged me out because of the greenish scum and the floating things. She scrubbed my feet till they tingled. I wasn't allowed there again.

And the Indian takeaway from three streets away made our house smell spicy when the wind was right. And we could hear the noise from St Andrew's when there was a home game. Mr Hardy from the corner shop always gave me a free penny chew. In queues and over washing lines people still talked about the Irish bombs, and I'd listen, even though I was only four when it happened, and couldn't really remember the bangs. There were toads in the wet leaves on the embankment. If I stood on my tiptoes, I could see the Rotunda from our bathroom window.

They took me away from there. As we turned out of our road I saw our postman on his bicycle. Outside the chemist I saw old Mr Soames with his missing thumb and bloated dog. Then my redbrick school flashed by. The mosque with the turquoise roof sped past, and the bingo hall, and the indoor market that smelt stuffy, and I squashed my face against the glass when I saw the signs for Moor Street station, because she'd taken me on the train once, just so that we could see what our house looked like from the tracks. I'd left Dog in my window, and glimpsed him as we rolled past. When my mother wasn't looking, I'd stuck two fingers up at the track workers for no reason, and they'd straightened their backs and wiped their brows. That was two summers before, when she was having a good spell. The pink plant on the shed roof had been in flower.

I didn't want to go. I grappled with my seat belt, tugged at the door handle, banged my fists against the glass so that people on the pavement looked up and stared. I wanted Mrs Willis. I wanted my beanbag and a glass of milk and the warm smell of my mother's hair. I wanted the silver bell on a chain that swung round her neck, but when I called out the woman next to me took hold of my wrists. She fought me. She used a voice with warning in it, and I wrenched away from her and buried my face in Dog. He smelt of home – jasmine, laundry, cigarette smells. I quietened. I stroked his nose with the pad of my thumb.

The rain came with the motorway. Birmingham thinned out to a few grey factories, car parks and graffiti. Then to nothing at all.

As children can at the strangest of times, I slept.

The car was hot; the rain drummed on the roof.

I woke with a sore head. Things looked different. The light in the car was stranger, sharper. I twisted in my seat. The woman beside me was reading. I looked from her to the driver to Dog, and waited. Something had changed. The wheels crunched on gravel.

I knew I'd seen the countryside before. There had been a school trip to the Lickey Hills once, and I'd eaten my packed lunch under an oak tree, amongst its dropped little acorns that looked like busy eggcups. My birthday present when I was six had been a blue and yellow kite, and we'd flown it on Cannock Chase amongst the badger sets. Mrs Willis used to promise to take me to Stratford. She said we would go boating and have cream teas. She never took me there, but I could picture it. I knew there'd be willow trees and ducks to feed, and in my head it never rained in Stratford. My River Avon was always sparkly blue.

But Wales was nothing like that.

It was empty and wet. It had stiff grey grasses and a big dark sky. Rain was like flung grit. The car lurched up the hillside, throwing me from side to side. I banged my head. I dropped Dog by my feet and was too padded and strapped up to reach him.

Outside there were rocks and mud and trees with no leaves on. I saw no other houses. No homes, no lights in the distance, no hidden gateways or drives. There were no other cars, no passers-by. The car plunged into a pothole.

'That's home for you now,' the woman said.

I couldn't see anything but stones at the top of the lane with a feeble light and a chimneypot. When I turned back to her, I saw the crumbs of Mrs Willis's fruitcake scattered in her lap.

Wales. Five letters, four hours and a whole world away. Nothing like Birmingham. Nothing at all like any city life.

To a seven-year-old with no mother any more, the differences would seem huge at first, and fearful. But, given time, some would prove so subtle they could be missed altogether – tap water tastes cleaner in Wales; wet earth has a real, incredible smell to it; clouds are bigger; birds come closer. Flowers seem much brighter out here. I don't know why, but they do.

And it would take months for me to get used to Welsh nights.

In the summer months, Birmingham nights were pinkish. Streetlights fuzzed on one by one. The birds never seemed to rest, and I'd lie awake with one leg dangling, listening to them through my open window. Stars were hard to see there. My mother said that stars were the souls of babies that hadn't been made yet. They were up there, hovering quietly, waiting to be picked out by mothers, brought down and turned into children. I didn't really believe her, but I wanted to. When I asked about my father, she always went back to her theory on stars. I'd sit by the window with Dog, gaze up at the few lights bright enough to be seen, and wonder whose babies they'd be, what sort of life they'd have down on the ground with the rest of us.

Welsh evening wasn't like that. It rolled down the valley like a fog. It was a proper darkness – as black as car oil or the inside of a letterbox. I looked for stars but there were none. As we pulled into the yard I saw someone standing there. I stared at my feet, at my holey red and grey trainers. I knocked my ankles together.

I knew my grandparents had come to visit me when I was born, that they bought me a cow mobile that hung in my bedroom for years and twirled when the radiator was on. They sent me pop-up birthday cards and pressed flowers, and my mother posted them photographs back. I knew she'd sent them my first school photograph – me, aged five, with unbrushable hair and no order to my

freckles. I hadn't wanted to smile for the camera. The teachers had coaxed me, pulled faces, and at the last minute, when everyone had grown tired of my pouting, I'd flashed my very best smile. My mother liked the picture. It made her laugh, and she used to keep it on the mantelpiece, next to the crispy dried rosebud and the well-thumbed postcard of Limerick Bay.

My grandmother opened the car door. She looked down at me with dark, thick-lashed eyes, and she lifted her hand to her mouth. I knew then that I looked terrible – swollen, sweaty, wretched and struggling in my woolly tights and heavy coat. I could smell the farmyard – straw, dung, petrol, the stench of dead water, the tang of wood smoke. I whimpered. I held out my hands and flexed my fingers at her, and she knelt down to unfasten me then. She worked quickly, with rough pink hands. I could see the down on the lobes of her ears, and the little grey strands in her hair. I felt her hands on my waist, and she lifted me and Dog and my duffel coat up, out of the car and into her arms. The skin on her neck was soft and warm. 'Hello, Evangeline,' she said, kissing my hair. 'Hello.' She wore a cream flowery blouse underneath a pale-blue jumper, and I grasped the collar with my fist, would not let it go. I breathed in the smell of her, and she said, 'It's OK, my love, it's OK.'

She held me tightly, and I could feel her shaking.

Over her shoulder I saw the wind in the trees, heard the trees creaking, and my grandmother kept saying my name.