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Thorn

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Rob Thorn applied a touch of green to the bottom left-hand side of the canvas. Then he stood, scrutinised and, eventually, smiled.

'That's it,' he said. 'Finished.'

He dragged his eyes away from the painting. He always felt the same at the end: a deepsea diver, surfacing from oceanic depths to rejoin the real world. You had to be careful not to ascend too quickly or you'd get the bends. The room shimmered back into focus. His gaze wandered over the canvases stacked against the walls. So much work. And so much more to do.

But not today.

He glimpsed himself in the paint-splattered mirror. His face, with its prominent cheekbones and dark eyes, wore the emptied-out expression that told of work completed.

'Enough,' he told his reflection.

His body was stiff from crouching over the canvas. He took a deep breath, stretched, and gave a bellow of delight. Life was good. He looked out of the upstairs bay window. The late-winter world shone bright, cold and clear. In Consort Park across the road the snowdrops and crocuses vied for attention, their white and purple flowers

glittering jewels scattered on the grass beneath the bare trees.

Near the tennis courts, Rob spotted two figures throwing a Frisbee: his children, Anna and Danny.

As always when fresh from the hermetically sealed world of his work, Rob caught his breath at the wonder of them. It was hard to believe such creatures existed and, moreover, that they owed that existence to him. To him and his pale, perfect Rosa. His White Queen. He banged on the window, but they were too far away to hear. He was overcome by an urge to be with them, to tell them how much he loved them.

To play Frisbee.

Well, why not? The painting was finished. He would go out there right now and join his children. He smiled as he watched them – gangling teenagers, regressing to childhood as they always did when out in the park with a ball or a Frisbee. He dropped his painting shirt onto the floor, put on a sweater and selected a track on his mp3 player. The mellow tones of Bob Marley filled his head with sunshine and nostalgia as he made his way out of the house. The sharp winter air hit his lungs, and he felt intensely alive, a sensate being in a world crammed with sensation. Tonight he'd take them all out for a meal. Somewhere trendy in the West End. He saw Anna floor Danny with a flying tackle and grab the Frisbee. He laughed and ran gladly forward, back into the land of the living.

'No woman no cry,' sang Bob, as Rob stepped off the kerb.

The boy driving the stolen Ford Mondeo was chatting to a fellow joyrider on his mobile. He felt a jolt and something dark passed over the windscreen like a cloud blocking the sun.

'Laters,' he told his mate, and accelerated out of the area at warp speed.

The Thorn children heard metal hitting flesh. They saw a lifesize rag doll describe an arc through the air before splitting open like a ripe pink watermelon as it hit the pavement outside their house. It took less than a minute for them to realise that their world had come to an end.

ONE

In the fading heat of early September, Consort Park resembles a young girl after a heavy night out – frowzy but still gorgeous. Golden afternoon light glints on the pooper-scoop bins, and in the distance I see Mary the Hologram dishing the latest local dirt into the avid ear of Singing Vic. Georges, Jacques et Jules are having a combative game of boules, and the artist who always paints the same tree is painting the same tree again. All is as it ever was.

As I walk I practise saying, 'I'm a widow.'

In the nine months since Rob's death I haven't yet come to grips with this particular sentence. No one queries your marital status at auditions. Everyone's a theatrical Miss. But supply teaching's different. There will be staffrooms and colleagues and nosiness. Particularly at Churchill Towers Comprehensive, if Jess is to be believed.

What tone should I use? Matter-of-fact? Brave little smile? Barely audible, in a low, musical timbre? The bronze statue of Albert, Prince Consort, stares down at me from his plinth at the top end of the park.

'I'm a widow,' I tell him.

'My wife was a widow for forty years,' he replies. 'Get used to it.'

Why am I going back into teaching anyway? That's easy: the money. A bit-part actress who hasn't worked for months doesn't bring in enough to support a gerbil, let alone a family of three.

'I'm a widow.' I try it again.

'I wish I was,' says an old woman on a bench wearing a scarf that doesn't quite hide a purple bruise on her cheek. 'I wish I was.'

No, you don't, old woman. You don't want your life destroyed by some idiot who, for all the police seem to care, is still on the loose killing innocent pedestrians. You don't want to hear that distinctive squeal of brakes followed by a muffled thud. And you certainly don't want to see the light of your life lying on the road with half his head missing, and quite clearly dead.

I leave the park, not by the gate where Rob died, but by the other one further up the hill. One day I'll go the quick way home, but not yet. Not while I can still see his brains spilling onto the pavement, and Singing Vic weeping as he tries to push them back in with his paisley handkerchief.

And Anna and Danny, motionless in the park, watching.

But we all have to move on. Tomorrow is a new day. The future beckons. My cup of clichés runneth over.

Churchill Towers Comprehensive is our future.

Rob would turn in his urn to know that Anna and Danny have swapped their independent schools for a comprehensive, but hey Rob, you should have left us the money for the fees, shouldn't you? And you should have looked before stepping into the road.

Anna's outside our gate talking to a stranger. They're both crouching down looking at something. It's a squirrel, flattened by yet another speeding car. It's still alive, but as we stare it gives a little sigh and is still. Maybe Rob gave the same sigh as he died. I must ask Singing Vic.

Anna's crying. 'Poor little thing.' She turns to her companion – whose cheeks, I notice, are also wet. 'I'll bury it in my garden.'

'Here,' says the man. He carefully wraps the squirrel in his scarf and hands it to Anna.

I'm touched by my daughter's devotion to dumb animals, but wish the dead ones didn't all end up in our garden. She has a special, ever-expanding patch that Rob called the Pet Cemetery. He said that when he died she could bury him by the cat, but on no account did he want to be anywhere near the goldfish.

In the event, he's in an urn at the back of a cupboard waiting for me to decide what to do with him.

'Anna, must you? There'll be no room for plants soon.'

Anna doesn't dignify this with an answer. She carries the squirrel into the house and I follow. The young man shuffles from foot to foot on the sun-dried pavement.

The house is cool after the sunshine. The walls are shaking and the decibel level is beyond imagination. Danny's playing 'Stairway to Heaven' on his electric guitar. With backing track. Even as his devoted mother I can tell he has some way to go before Jimmy Page needs to start worrying. Still, he enjoys it, and that's the main thing. Maybe his inexpert fumblings are a way of expressing his grief and loss, because he sure as hell

hasn't let his feelings out in any other way. At first after Rob died, Danny was strong for all of us. I haven't yet seen him cry. I've tried to talk to him, to say that even though he's seventeen, it's still OK to be sad, but I can't penetrate the self-contained façade. Jess says it's because he's an adolescent male. Adolescent boys tell their mothers zilch. But what does she know? Her own particular adolescent male isn't exactly Mr Normal.

I make supper. Anna appears, flushed and sticky from grave digging. Blissful silence falls as Danny, seduced by the smell of lamb stew, packs away his guitar and comes down to eat. At the end of the meal, there's a pause. No one wants to leave the table and do what they have to do. Tomorrow looms. Out with the old. In with the . . . what?

We're all aware of the gap where Rob used to sit.

'Should we pack our satchels now?' I say. My children indulge me with faint smiles.

'I'm going to take an apple for the teacher. Oh, whoops – I *am* the teacher.'

'Give it up, Mum,' says Danny.

Later I put the rubbish out. Anna's Squirrel Man is still there, over the road staring at our house. I shout hello. Unsmiling, he acknowledges my greeting, leaning immobile against the park railings. A flurry of wind blows some dead leaves up the path. I shiver. Autumn's round the corner.