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Opening Extract from...

Bed

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1

Asleep he sounds like a pig hunting truffles in soot. It isn't snoring, more of a death rattle. But for that it is a quiet morning, the morning of Day Seven Thousand Four Hundred and Eighty-Three, according to the display on the wall.

The peace is punctuated only by the crashing of a crow into the patio door. This almighty clatter doesn't wake Mal, who continues to produce great growls from deep within his chest. They echo in my ears like the sonar conversations between dolphins and submarines.

Mal weighs a hundred stone, they predicted. That's big. That's more than half a ton. Those photographs you see of whales that have beached and exploded, split by the build-up of gases inside, the thick coating of blubber that blankets the sand, that's what Mal looks like. He has grown and swelled across the bed, two king-size and

a single tied together. He has spread out so far from the nucleus of his skeleton, he is an enormous meat duvet.

It has taken him twenty years to become this big. He isn't even the colour of skin any more. Peppered with burst capillaries, a truck-sized block of sausage meat packed into a pair of cheap tights. The fat has claimed his toe- and fingernails, his nipples have stretched to the span of a female hand, and only something with the tenacity of a biscuit crumb could meander through the folds of his tummy. There must be enough for a full packet of biscuits in there by now. In twenty years Mal has become a planet with its own uncharted territories. We are the moons, caught in his orbit, Lou and Mum and Dad and me.

I lie in bed next to him, listening to the great honks his lungs make as they work their hardest to fart a little more air from his mouth. Just the dull, constant drone of it, like having your ears packed with wet bread.

Every rise of his chest triggers a seismic shudder through the room. The ripple of his flab sends waves across the puddle of his body. I ride them, nothing to do but stare out over Mal's fleshy expanse, the enormous blistered coffin that trapped my brother inside it, to the garden where I watch the bird coat the glass. Maybe it saw Mal as it flew by and mistook him for an enormous trifle.

Twenty years in bed. Mal's death is the only thing that can save this family because his life has destroyed it. And here I am, at the end, sharing this room with him. The room we began in. Or at least a fraction of it.

Dad told me once, 'To love someone is to watch them die.'

2

In the tiny front room of a seaside bed and breakfast we were making a scene. The little old lady who had carried our bowls of cornflakes through from the kitchen had thin, yellow skin. She looked as though she were woven from cigarette smoke. Rather than meet Mum's eye, she shuffled cushions she'd already shuffled and pretended to have spilt a drop of ghostly weak tea on the doily that lay across the dresser.

That morning Mal had woken me as he argued with Mum in the doorway of the room that we were sharing. He was naked but not embarrassed by it like other boys his age. Sometimes he wouldn't get dressed for days. Dad would say, 'Jesus Christ, Malcolm, will you put some fucking clothes on?' Mal wouldn't reply but Mum would say it didn't matter. Mum. Killing us with her kindness. On occasion Dad would grip Mal under his

armpit and drag him to his room, our room. He'd hold him on the bed with one hand on his chest and fold Mal's reluctant little legs into tracksuit bottoms. Mal would resist and Dad would sweat, ordering him to stay there until he could stop acting like 'a fucking baby'. Mal would jig back in within minutes, his clothes cast across the floor. He looked like a bald baby chicken, skinny arms and corners.

'You're round the fucking hat rack, you,' Dad would grumble.

'Please, love, leave him be,' Mum would whisper. Mal could do nothing Mum wouldn't forgive. She'd stand between his eccentricities and the world, even as her face pinkened.

'This is why we don't go on bloody holiday, Malcolm!' she yelled. 'This is why we're better off at home. Everything is much, much easier at home. Now put some bloody clothes on, we're going to the beach.'

'I don't want to go to the beach,' was the length of it.

'Then you'll have to have breakfast naked then, won't you?' Mum said.

So we were having breakfast. Not Dad, he'd 'gone to put a bet on', he said, though it was probably a lie. And Mal was naked. And he was flicking cereal about the table. And Mum was staring at the old lady pretending to straighten the curtains. And the family at the table next to ours hadn't said a word over their crumpets and orange juice. I leant over to Mal and I whispered, 'Why?'

He popped one of those little cartons of milk into his mouth and burst it with his teeth so that it dripped

down his chest, and then he shivered because it was as cold as snowman-building fingers.

When Dad arrived back he was still an angry purple, the shade of a kick to the shins. He took one look at Mal, who was busy stirring his tea with a flower from the vase in the centre of the table, caught him by the elbow and carried his limp, naked body outside to the car.

Mal went to sleep almost immediately. He slept more than anyone else I knew but then I didn't know many people. I didn't even know Mal very well. I listened to Mum and Dad have an argument in which both were fighting for the same thing but neither realised it. Apparently we had to pay for that bed and breakfast for the full week even though we'd been there for just two days.

Mal didn't put any clothes on for a fortnight. We never did go to the beach. I didn't mind, it was November.

3

Dad didn't work, he toiled. That's what he said. Toiling seemed a bit like work except far harder and much less enjoyable. Even the sound was unpleasant. Toil.

He was big, like a robot, like a monster, but he was quiet like neither. His hands were whitened with hardened skin that had buckled and cracked, gloves of used tin foil, and so when he'd take us fishing I wouldn't hold them except for when we crossed the road. When I did they had the power in them to crush mine like you'd grip and smash the head of a frozen rose.

Mal, on the other side, would embed his hand in Dad's rough palm and be guided down the path by it, chirping and fidgeting, a Mexican jumping bean boy.

Dad would shout 'hurry up' and I'd follow their meshed shadow all the way to the canal. He'd slip a

maggot into his mouth, loll it under his tongue and grin, the one trick of an old dog, and amaze Mal over and over again. I'd seen it once, it was enough. Then they would talk, Dad filling Mal's head with infinite possibilities. Suggestions, things to make and do. He'd tell us all about the world, promote it and intrigue us. The controller and the fantasist, harmonious fact and fiction on the slippery bank. I hated fishing, it was just waiting in mud. I couldn't wait to go home to Mum. None of us could, really.

4

Mal liked to be the first person to do things. Not just the first person in the house, or the first person in his class, but the first person in the entire world. There is a limit to the things you can be first to do when you are a child. He used to ask, 'Has anyone ever . . . ?' Mum would say yes, if only to stop him trying to walk across the bottom of the sea. She learned this lesson on a rare occasion when she chose not to listen to him. Five hours after she had palmed him off with an absent-minded 'no', the policeman that came to placate her worst fears spotted Mal naked on the roof, clinging to the television aerial. It was the middle of the summer. The fire brigade came and carried him down, much against his will. I'd hoped they'd have to shoot him with a tranquiliser dart like a bear that needed urgent medical attention, and that he might roll all the way off and land in a dustbin.

Soon, to limit the chances of him presenting himself to danger, Mum hit upon the idea of speech. She told Mal that there were almost infinite combinations of words that, if you were to string them together, you would almost certainly be the first person to have uttered in that order. For six months Mal would bark endlessly unintelligible chains of words just to be the first that ever had. Most came from a dictionary, he didn't need to know what they meant.

'Disbelieving diagnosis ferocious atrocious hegemony telephony gripe, never never never, eat fruit until it's ripe.'

'Pinecone overthrown on the throne phone home moan drone blown bone time lime zone, oh my haven't you grown.'

It pleased her. Mal always gave, but in his own way.

Her devotion was a blanket that smothered but was warm nonetheless. Her life had been sacrificed for the bettering of those around her. In another time, with a candle, a billowing blue dress and a ferocious war fought on a smoky field, she would have been the most popular nurse with every doomed soldier that passed through her charge. But instead she was born to us: her mum, who I could barely remember; Dad; Mal. She'd swung between them on vines, tending them, loving them, leaving with nothing for herself. And now that her mother was dead, and Dad had begun to retreat, to Mal she had devoted herself fully. She knew how to do nothing else.