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Lost and Found

Written by Tom Winter

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LOST AND FOUND

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corsair

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CAROL

1



CAROL WANTS A disease. Nothing deadly, and nothing crippling. She doesn't aspire to disabled parking, for instance, despite its obvious advantages.

'It's true I haven't done much with my life,' she wants to tell people, 'but it's the . . . the leprosy.'

She imagines how they would nod sympathetically, albeit while backing away, and even she might feel better about looking at herself in the mirror each morning: a middle-aged woman who hasn't accomplished much because she can't, because she's been too busy peeling off dead skin and looking for missing body parts.

'Yes,' she'd say, as she arrives at work late yet again, 'I know I'm crap at this, but the good news is I've found a couple of my fingers.'

But, no, there is no disease, no excuse to hide behind. She has a husband who's a certifiable dickhead, but this isn't her disability *per se*. And her daughter – well, what can she say on that subject? In the months prior to giving birth, she read

every book on child-rearing she could find. In retrospect, Sun Tzu's *Art of War* would have been a better choice, or perhaps a field study of rabid primates.

Naturally, this isn't how she'd expected to feel about motherhood, but watching her baby daughter morph into a teenager has been an alarming experience, like cresting the first hill of a rollercoaster just as she realized her seatbelt was broken.

Now seventeen, her daughter stands on the cusp of independence, the whole world at her feet. And Carol is on a bus home, staring at a window too wet with rain to offer a view of anything; an indeterminate cityscape, as fractured and abstract as her own life – the hint of a street sign, the edge of a shop front, but nothing complete, nothing she can look at and say, 'Ah, that's where I am.'

So, nearly twenty years of married life have come to this:

'I'm leaving.'

She savours the words for a moment, already regretting that she'll only get to say them once. Condensing so many years of frustration into two small words has given them a curious, almost nuclear power, as if they might slip from her mouth and accidentally level the whole of London.

She knows she'll tell her husband over dinner tonight, though she still isn't sure how she'll raise the subject. The only certainty is that she'll serve a nicer dessert than usual – her favourite, as it happens – though she'll try her best to make this seem like an act of consolation rather than celebration.

2



It's striking how much can change in twelve or thirteen miles. Carol has seen runners on half-marathons, everyone crossing the finishing line with rosy cheeks and broad smiles. The same cannot be said of London. In the twelve miles between Westminster and Croydon, London is reduced from a city of parks and palaces to this, an unrecognizable commuter belt, a grey concrete mess. To say London ends at Croydon is only half true: stripped of hope and worn down, London really crawls into Croydon and dies.

Of course, this isn't something people are inclined to admit in Carol's part of Croydon, where the overworked middle classes still want to believe in the dream – waxing their cars on Sunday afternoons, decorating their window ledges with scented candles and porcelain figurines.

Carol tries not to think about her neighbour's habits as she walks home from the bus stop, tries not to care that the whole estate is a labyrinth of cul-de-sacs, more a communal

Petri dish than a place to live. Tonight she will be cutting her ties to this place. Soon she will float free.

'Carol!' Mandy Horton comes running from a nearby house, her every move a clatter of bangles and costume jewellery. 'Bob and Tony are playing darts tonight. They want us to meet them at the pub.'

'What?'

'Bob and Tony—'

'No, I mean Bob never mentioned anything about going to the pub tonight.'

'So?' replies Mandy, with a dismissive snort.

For a brief moment, Carol wonders what those snorts would sound like if she held Mandy's head underwater, perhaps even kept it there, submerged, until she went limp and cold to the touch.

She realizes Mandy is talking.

'. . . and it is Tuesday. It's not like there's anything else to do.'

Carol steals a glance at her shopping bag, the dessert almost poking from the top. 'I was hoping to have a chat with Bob, that's all.'

'But you can do that at the pub, silly! How about I come by in thirty minutes?' Her eyes flit across Carol's dress, a hint of pity in her face. 'It'll give you time to change.'

When Carol gets home, the house has a burgled look: not messy so much as strewn, as if the entire building has been lifted from its foundations and kicked around while she was out.

She hesitates at the foot of the stairs, certain that her daughter Sophie is up there somewhere. For Carol, the fact that a teenager can achieve total invisibility in a modest three-bedroom home says it all: Sophie has guerrilla instincts that could put the Viet Cong and the Taliban to shame.

'Sophie?'

Silence.

She ponders going upstairs to say hello – perhaps have another stab at that mother-daughter thing she's aspired to for the last seventeen years – but then thinks better of it. The simple act of dialogue with Sophie has become so rare, it seems better to save the moment for when she has something important to say: 'Yes, I'm leaving', 'No, I'm not coming back'.

She feels a stab of guilt, not at the prospect of having that conversation, but at the possibility of enjoying it. It isn't that Sophie's a bad child, she's just not the sort Carol would have chosen had it been a mail-order process. The only things she really understands about her daughter are the qualities she inherited from Bob – an ability to reduce the house to chaos, for instance, and an expectation that Carol will always be there to deal with the aftermath. Everything else just seems oddly foreign and incomprehensible. Even her intelligence feels redolent of a manufacturing error: how could a bright, studious child have been assembled from this genetic material? It's a question Carol can't answer; a question that leaves her with the vague sense that, in getting the daughter everyone thinks they want, she missed out on the kind that could have loved and needed her.

Thinking the sound of the refrigerator being restocked might provoke a visceral reaction – after all, even clever people have to eat – she labours over the dessert: slowly peels away the packaging, carefully puts it on a plate, slides it into the refrigerator, with the heavy-handed clank of porcelain on metal.

In the loaded silence that follows, she decides she won't go to the pub tonight – might not even answer the door when Mandy arrives in the inevitable cloud of perfume. Instead, she'll wait for Bob to return and will then set about destroying their life together, much as a butterfly must destroy its cocoon in order to live.

3



YES, SHE WENT to the pub after all, succumbing to the same emotional paralysis that has seen her spend years wanting to leave Bob but never quite finding the courage to make it happen; a life that has been dedicated to other people's happiness even at the expense of her own. Yet as she watches the evening unfold around her – a room full of people drinking to forget the futility of their own lives – she knows tonight is still the night she breaks free.

When the time finally comes for them to go home, Carol and Bob drive in an unusual silence, insulated from the tragedy of late-night Croydon by the suburban bubble of their three-door hatchback. Carol's heard of animals sensing earthquakes hours and even days beforehand. Is the same thing now happening with Bob? She glances at him behind the wheel, certain that if she could peel back his skull she'd find just a hollow, empty space, perhaps a single red light flashing in the darkness.

'I didn't expect it to be a pub night,' she says. It feels

good to initiate The Conversation, her first move towards freedom.

'No, it was a last-minute thing. I . . . I thought it'd be good to get out.'

'Actually, I was hoping we could talk.'

Bob looks alarmed. 'What – you and me?'

'Yes, Bob, you and me.'

His eyes widen, and for a moment Carol thinks he might be having some kind of aneurysm – a convenient end to her marriage, it's true, but not what she wants when travelling at sixty miles an hour.

'Bob, are you all right?'

Still those wide eyes.

'Bob? Bob, stop the car.'

Nothing.

'Bob! Pull over! Now!'

They begin to slow.

By the time they pull to a stop, Bob is slouched in his seat. 'You know, don't you?'

Carol stares at him, so confused she momentarily forgets that she's supposed to be leaving him. 'Know what?'

'That's why I wanted us to spend the night at the pub.'

'Bob—'

'You know, to relax.'

'Bob—'

'I thought it'd be a distraction.'

'For fuck's sake, just say it.'

He begins to cry. 'I've got a lump. On my testicle.'

'Oh, shit, I'm sorry . . .' She tries to reach for him, but

her seatbelt snags. She struggles to unbuckle it, turns to face him. 'Look, Bob, it's going to be all right.'

'I was hoping it would just go away, but . . .'

She holds his hands with an affection that surprises even her. 'Look, it's all okay. I understand.'

'I just thought a game of darts . . . I don't know, it sounds mad, but I thought it'd bring me luck.'

'And did you win?'

'No.' He begins crying harder.

'Bob . . .'

'What if I lose my balls?'

Even in the auto-pilot of Carol's compassion, it strikes her that Bob is a forty-something man in an almost sexless marriage – under the circumstances, his testicles became unnecessary baggage years ago.

'And what if it's spread?' he says, more panicked now.

'Bob, it might be nothing. Just a lump.'

He chokes back the tears. 'I don't want to die.'

And, right then, she does feel sorry for him, this grown man who's been reduced to helplessness.

'We're going to the doctor first thing in the morning, okay?'

She imagines the doctor laughing and telling them it's nothing, a mere physical expression of Bob's mental decrepitude. On their way home, Carol will tell him she doesn't love him, has never really loved him. With a sharp dose of reality and a course of antibiotics, both she and the lump will disappear from his life for ever.

And yet here he is, looking up at her, imploring,

desperate, terrified. 'God,' he says, 'I love you so much.'

'I know,' is all she can manage, but still he gazes at her, a frightened man with an ominous lump; a man for whom a few simple words would make all the difference.

'And I . . .' she adds, with barely a stammer '. . . I love you too.'

ALBERT

4



'I THINK IT'S stuck.'

'Well, I know that, Albert.'

'Probably a loose stamp or something.'

Albert peers into the sorting machine with a fearful expression. It reminds him of the Hadron Collider he's seen on television, the one that's supposed to explain everything about the universe. The machine here at the Royal Mail sorting office is much smaller, of course – it doesn't loop beneath South London for forty miles or anything like that – but it still has a quality that makes Albert uneasy. He can remember the names of all the people it's replaced and, quite frankly, it's smarter than all of them put together, which only begs the question: why use something so clever just to sort envelopes into little piles? It's like asking Einstein to make a cup of tea.

'This thing has secrets,' he says, 'mark my words.'

'What's that, Albert?' The trainee screws up his face as he says it, evidently convinced that everything old people say is incomprehensible.

'I said I can't help you.'

'I didn't ask you to. The engineer's coming in an hour.'

That's something else that's changed, thinks Albert, as he trudges away. He can remember a time when the men nearing retirement were looked up to as heroes. A trainee would have felt privileged even to get a clip round the ear from one of them. Albert's not a man of imposing height or stature, it's true, but what remains of his hair is clearly grey, which should at least count for something.

'It's a world gone mad,' he mutters to himself. 'All the good men are dead and gone . . .'

Even though no one is listening, he regrets his choice of words. He's already scared of his impending retirement; he doesn't need to bring mortality into it too.

From across the room, a voice: 'You're a lucky bastard, Albert, you know that?'

He looks up to see his supervisor, Darren, approaching; a forty-something middle manager with a liking for clipboards.

'A few more weeks and it's all over for you, isn't it?' There's a moment of tense silence. 'The job, I mean. Get out of this place, the days free to do whatever you want.'

'I'd rather keep working.'

'Nah, you don't mean that.' He doesn't wait for a response. 'You know, I envy you, actually. Time for yourself, time to do some gardening—'

'I live in a flat.'

'Well, window boxes can be lovely. There's a real art to them too. And there's always the grandkids to keep you busy.'

Childless, Albert decides to let the comment pass. There's

something about having no family that always seems to alarm people. He can almost see the fear in their faces, that if he has no wife or children, maybe one day he might ask them to take him to the toilet or give him a bath.

'The theme parks are great for kids. I dare say they all offer discounts for pensioners.'

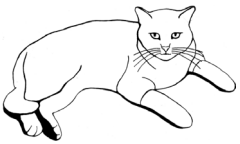
'If nothing else, my cat will be happy to have me around.' This is all Albert can say with conviction: that his cat, the only other living thing in his life, will continue to need and want him regardless.

'Well, there you go,' replies Darren. 'And kids love animals.' He looks at his watch in a practised, self-important way. 'You're the man of the moment, so let me know if there's anything you need, okay?'

He hurries away before Albert can reply – plead for his job, perhaps, or ask to be taken outside and shot.

Albert is still watching him go when one of the girls from the admin office approaches. 'Albert?' she says, with the awkward, wide-eyed look of someone delivering bad news. 'One of your neighbours just called. It's about your cat . . .'

5



At least Gloria isn't dead. She's awkward to carry in this position. And it's surprising how even a couple of legs in plaster make her so much heavier. But at least she isn't dead.

A younger cat might have handled the fall better, though a younger cat probably wouldn't have jumped from a window six floors up.

That's the trouble with old age, thinks Albert. Your mind starts failing you just when you need it the most.

He isn't at that stage yet, but he wonders how it will be in the years to come: who will be there to stop him wandering the streets in his pyjamas or going for a walk on the railway line. He used to tell himself that Gloria would be a stabilizing influence, but it's hard to claim that now.

Loud voices drift on the air, young men flush with beer. Albert quickens his pace. The streets are already quieter than he would like; a reminder that darkness is a time to lie low.

At moments like this he's glad to be wearing his official

Royal Mail coat, its logo declaring his neutral mission in life, the impartial delivery of post to saints and sinners alike.

Now that retirement is just a few weeks off, he worries whether he'll be allowed to keep the coat – though he also wonders what he's supposed to do with it even if he does. He wants to keep wearing it, of course, but he can see that might lead to all sorts of problems: people haranguing him on the street about lost mail, wanting to know why it took four days for a first-class letter to travel ten miles. He's heard it all in his time. Better, he thinks, just to wear the coat at home sometimes, on Sundays perhaps. But when he imagines the future, it seems every day will feel like a Sunday, so what then?

Gloria miaows, clearly unhappy about, well, everything.

'Look at you. They've turned you into a blunt instrument, haven't they? I could bludgeon someone to death with those legs.'

Encouraged by the thought, he walks a little taller, moving deeper into the warren of graffitied tower blocks and shadowy stairwells that he calls home.

6



It's been almost forty years since Albert's wife died, but not much has changed in the flat where they were briefly so happy together. The bed she died in is still here, its mattress springs a little worse for wear, but otherwise functional. The wardrobe where she used to hang her clothes is still in the bedroom, its shelves much less organized than she would have liked. Here and there, a few of her things still remain – a faded glove, a musty scarf – each a bittersweet reminder of a life that has long since vanished.

Perhaps the biggest change is Albert himself: his hair is gently receding, like a slow-moving tide; his once-youthful skin another casualty of age and gravity.

He peers at himself in the mirror, not vain so much as intrigued.

'At least I still have my teeth,' he says to Gloria.

With two broken legs to deal with, she probably doesn't give a shit. While she blinks – in pain, in boredom, it's impossible to tell – Albert bares his teeth and admires them

from a variety of angles. He dreams of doing this at the supermarket whenever he buys toothpaste – 'Look, I've still got all my teeth!' he wants to shout, his lips drawn back like a monkey on the attack – but he knows people would think him mad, and who cares if you've got your teeth but lost your mind?

Unaware of finding the thought sad, and unable to see that he's really a man grown old before his years, he turns away from the mirror.

'Well, Gloria, it's time for bed.' He carefully fluffs a mound of shredded toilet roll into a deep nest around her. 'I don't want you worrying about, you know, the call of nature. You just let it out and I'll clean it all up tomorrow.'

He tries to smile as he says it, but he's unsure how this is going to work.

'And I'll sleep with my door open, so you just call if you need me.'

She blinks at him enigmatically and turns to face the window.

She's got a death wish, thinks Albert. She's just biding her time until she can jump again.

While Gloria stares out of the window, Albert looks at a large patch of mould on the wall above, the cause of all his problems. This was the only reason he left the window open today, to let some air in, but all he has to show for it now is a crippled cat and an even bigger patch of mould.

Trying not to worry about it, he simply turns off the light and retreats to his bedroom. Before climbing into bed, he lingers by a photograph of his wife, its tarnished

silver frame at risk of disappearing in the chaos of his housekeeping.

'Good night, sweetheart.'

She smiles up at him like a rabbit caught in a car's headlights, trapped between the sixties and the seventies in a strange new world she didn't live long enough to understand.

And then, with the flick of a switch, the day is over.

In darkness now, Albert settles into the furrowed mattress. He's never consciously acknowledged that he's afraid of what each new day might bring; that he's scared of losing what little he has. He just dismisses the sensation as heartburn.

'I really should buy some Tums,' he mutters, as he wraps his arms around a tattered old pillow, shutting his eyes in sleep while the world around him grinds onward in a distant rumble of sirens and car alarms.

And, through it all, Gloria sits immobile in the living room, her legs in plaster but her mind alert, gazing out at the blinking lights of aeroplanes waiting to land at Heathrow and Gatwick.

What she's seen on many occasions but will never comprehend is that the planes are moving in seemingly endless holding patterns, so that it often appears as if some people spend their entire lives trapped, going round and round in circles but never arriving.