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Father Figure

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Extract

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although the events in this book take place in Somerset, the schools, teachers, children, representatives of the Education Authority, officials of the Child Support Agency, and all other characters are entirely fictitious. They are not based, even loosely, on real people and should there be any similarity of name between someone in this book and someone in a similar occupation in Somerset that is purely coincidental.

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Kat walked out between the Roman and Norman conquests. Jason knew this because she had rung him on his mobile as he was making his way to the staffroom having spent the last period before break explaining straight roads, mosaics, central heating and *veni, vidi, vici* to a Year Seven class which would never have any acquaintance with the Latin language nor read the works of Julius Caesar. As usual Nick Bright asked too many difficult questions and Terry Pepper daydreamed, spending the last five minutes of the lesson carefully colouring a toga in his workbook despite Jason's clear statement that togas were mainly white.

Kat's call had surprised Jason. She too taught and rarely rang him at school, being deeply critical of the use of mobile phones for what she described as idle chatter and wary of the possible effects on the brain. The second reason for his surprise was that the number on his screen was that of their home not her school or her own mobile. He was about to ask if she was all right when she forestalled him with an enquiry about the whereabouts of Jake's Harry Potter, which he had confiscated at midnight after his eight-year-old son had started reading in the forlorn hope that his light would not be noticed once his parents had gone to bed.

Jason might have wondered what had prompted such a

query in the middle of the working day if he had not been so preoccupied with the need to locate one of his colleagues in the short time allowed for break. He replied that he could not remember but that he would look for it after school, sensing that Kat found this frustrating. Any puzzlement he might have felt was immediately forgotten as he glimpsed his fellow teacher and hurriedly set off in pursuit.

He did not think about this conversation with his wife until just after lunch when he was in the middle of describing the Bayeux Tapestry. The girls winced as King Harold received an arrow in the eye but some of the boys looked mildly interested for the first time during the lesson. For some reason he suddenly recalled where he had put the Harry Potter and rang Kat between classes. When she answered her mobile it was obvious she was using the hands-free kit in her car. This time he did ask what was going on. Why wasn't she at school and was that the kids he could hear in the background? She said, 'Tell you later' and rang off.

On Tuesdays he returned home late because the history club met after school and today it took longer than usual because the pupils were practising an archaeological dig in a nearby field which was being excavated for development. The finds were minimal, had no historical significance and caused a great deal of merriment.

Nick Bright was studying a halfpenny. 'It says 45 BC, sir. Do you think Julius Caesar dropped it?'

'I am more interested in who made it. He must have been a clairvoyant if he knew when Christ was going to be born.'

Amid the laughter Jason noticed one or two disappointed faces. Surely they hadn't fallen for so obvious a

joke? He looked at his watch and decided it was time they went home.

Collecting a set of Year Twelve essays from the classroom, he made his way to the car park, vaguely noticing the few remaining vehicles: a Fiat belonging to a young drama teacher, the sports coach's Ford Focus, a battered Vauxhall Estate in which Ed Deacon, head of geography, used to bring his older children to school. Ed's wife had left him a year ago, taking the children with her, and now the geography teacher delayed his return home for as long as possible each evening.

The car of Angus Gaskill, the deputy head, stood in front of the school under the sign saying 'Reception'. Jason did not need to look at the space beside it to know it was empty. The head, Ralph Hillier, only stayed late for meetings of the governors, leaving parents' evenings and other functions to his deputy. Ten years ago pupils went to Oxford from Morton's, now applications were falling year on year and the arrival of children such as Nick Bright was greeted with sarcastic speculation as to whether anyone had told their parents that there were other schools in the area. The police came to the school several times a week. Hillier was focused on his retirement, now less than eighteen months away, and the rest of the staff were waiting for it to happen before deciding what to do next.

Not everyone had given in to the malaise and those who still had hope and energy left tried to stimulate and inspire, drawing closer to each other as they pooled their efforts. No one contradicted them or made any overt attempt to cool their enthusiasm, simply meeting their ideas with shrugs rather than argument. Their numbers dwindled each term as some left for other schools or, in two cases, other professions. Kat had nagged Jason to

follow their example and he had talked, without originality but with much conviction, about rats and sinking ships. Kat too had shrugged but with impatience rather than resignation.

Jason put the pile of essays and his jacket on the back seat of the Astra and his boots, muddy from the archaeological exercise, on the floor behind the driver's seat. As he was about to get in the front he heard his name called and looked up to see Angus Gaskill approaching from the main entrance. He stood by the open car door and watched warily as the deputy head walked towards him. He was conscious suddenly of fatigue and was unwilling to be further delayed.

'Just had Social Services on the phone. They're taking the Beggs children into care.'

Jason's heart sank. Chrissy Beggs was in his form and already disruptive to the point of having been twice suspended. He had tried to persuade Hillier to exclude her and believed that the head was close to agreeing but now he knew that he would decide to wait and see how the new domestic arrangements worked.

'Why?'

'Mister is in prison and Missus injecting heroin.'

'So what's new?'

'The disappearance of the three-year-old for an entire afternoon. Mother was too spaced out to notice and it only came to light when said child wandered into the path of a car.'

Jason shuddered. 'My God!'

'It's OK. The driver managed to stop but he was pretty shaken.'

'I suppose they'll want reports?'

Gaskill gave a sympathetic grin. 'Yes, sorry. The good news is that the nearest relation lives in Blackburn so it

may become Lancashire's problem rather than Somerset's. I wouldn't shed any tears.'

'No, but I wouldn't uncork the Champagne either. The relative may not take them.'

'Not if he or she has any sense.'

The callous, careless words lingered on the air. Even Gaskill was becoming disillusioned, thought Jason sadly. They all were. The Beggs children were merely nuisances, not small beings to be pitied and helped. If Chrissy and her brothers got through the day without misbehaving it was as much as their teachers asked; whether they were also happy or had absorbed even the most minimal information were not questions which would actively preoccupy those who saw to their education.

Gaskill read his thoughts. 'I'm getting too old for it all.'

'So am I and I'll be thirty-two next month.' Jason climbed into his car and looked up at the deputy head. 'Don't let it get to you.'

'Ghastly American expression.'

'Is it?'

'Totally ghastly and also illiterate, but you teach history not English so I don't suppose it matters.'

'I meant, is it American? Anyway Matt Johnson tells me he doesn't teach much grammar any more. Not enough time for it in the curriculum.'

'That doesn't stop me. Not that they let me do much teaching now. It's all paper, paper, paper, targets, statistics and meetings. Not for much longer though.'

Jason, who had been wondering how to cut the conversation short and who had inserted the ignition key as a hint, now looked up sharply. 'Not for much longer?'

'No. I'm not applying for Ralph's job next year and I'm not staying in this one either. I'm going early.'

'Will they let you?'

'I shan't be giving them a choice in the matter.'

'What about your pension?'

'It will do. My parents left me money and Elizabeth will have a pension too. Anyway I can always try to teach in the private sector for a couple of years. I haven't told anybody else so keep it under your hat for a while.'

Gaskill gave the roof of the car a pat of farewell and stood back to let Jason drive away, leaving him unsure as to whether he should actually do so. He wondered if Gaskill wanted to be argued out of his proposed course of action, if he wanted to talk, if the fate of the Beggs children were not the real reason the deputy head had stopped him leaving, but when he looked in the mirror Gaskill was already walking back into the school.

Relieved, Jason let his thoughts turn to home. He would still arrive in time to read to Leah and have supper with Kat and Jake. The essays on which he had already made a start would only take a couple of hours after that. On the way he stopped at Oddbins and bought a bottle of Jacob's Creek. It had not been an easy day and Kat had sounded fraught when she had rung him earlier.

It was not the absence of Kat's car from the side of the house or the unlit windows which told him what had happened: it was the silence. The stillness he felt as soon as he entered his home, *their* home, was not that of temporary absence but of emptiness, taking Jason back twenty years when he had walked into his great-grandmother's house after her funeral. Twelve years ago he had returned to the flat he shared with his student girlfriend and had known she was not coming back even before he saw the note on the kitchen table, carefully placed between his knife and fork as if she had measured the distance and straightened the envelope with a plumb

line. It might have been a statement of finality, of careful thought, of an orderly departure, or maybe she had stood there, uncertain, her hand still on the letter while she pushed it into place, adjusting it, lining it up because she did not want to let go.

Now he stood in the hall and switched on the light, uncomforted by its yellow beam, untouched by the warmth of the central heating, cold with shock, numb with fear, seeing everywhere the evidence of desertion even as he mentally denied it. There was no pushchair in the hall, no schoolbag carelessly dropped, no boots by the back door, which he could see through the kitchen. In the hall cupboard were no coats or jackets or waterproofs but his own.

Foolishly he still hoped as he entered the other rooms, searching in each for some contrary sign, some flood of reassurance, some wakening from the nightmare. Instead he found, as he had known he would, only the misery of confirmation, the chill of certainty. Kat had not found the time or the space in the car to take everything from the children's rooms yet they already looked empty, dusty, abandoned, as if their occupants had left long ago. In the room he had shared with Kat a screwed-up tissue with lipstick stains lay on the otherwise bare dressing table. Lipstick stains, not tear stains, thought Jason. Kat had been thinking about her appearance as she left him.

What had she told the children? Had she said they were going away for a little while, a big adventure in the middle of the school term, or had she told them the truth? We are leaving Daddy. You won't be able to see him every day any more. He won't be living with us.

There should be a law against it. That sentiment up till now had been a family joke, a superior distancing of the small unit of Kirks from those who could use the

statement and mean it. Even Jake had taken to uttering the words with smug amusement especially when commenting on Leah's three-year-old antics. Now Jason found himself at a loss to understand why what had happened to him was allowed to happen, though he was scarcely aware of the question forming in his mind beneath the turmoil of shock and denial.

The telephone shrilled and he sprang to it. 'Kat?'

There was a brief but discernible pause on the other end of the line. 'No, it's me. Is anything wrong?'

'No,' he lied as he wondered what to tell his mother. Eileen Kirk was a worrier who doted on her grandchildren and he would need to work out how and when to tell her that full-time parenthood had suddenly been snatched from him, without explanation, without a quarrel. Despair made him want to be cruel, to devastate as he had been devastated, to say, 'Kat has walked out' and to listen to her reaction, but he did not do so because her response would inevitably be, 'Why?' and he had no answer.

The momentary anger was succeeded by deep misery as he realised he could not protect his mother for much longer, that she must know. Three months a widow, she must now face a son's broken marriage. He could no more shield her from life's spears than she had been able to shield him as he passed from childhood to adulthood. Although relations between her and Kat had always been perfectly cordial they had never progressed to warmth in the way his friendship with Kat's parents had and he knew that she would hate her access to Jake and Leah resting on the goodwill of her daughter-in-law.

For now he must be content to deceive. 'Kat is out somewhere and I was wondering if she wanted me to do anything about supper.'

'Oh. It sounded more urgent. Is my little Jakey there?'

Jason's teeth automatically prepared to grit at the diminutive but tonight pity replaced irritation. 'Sorry, no. They're both with Kat.'

'Well, ask him to ring me when he gets back.'

'I'll do that.' He knew he was playing for time, to find some way of minimising the pain. When his mother did not receive Jake's call she would ring back and by then he would have had time to think. Some dim recognition flitted across his mind that he was postponing not her misery but his own, that he was refusing to confront what had happened, that he wanted urgently to end the conversation not so that he could order his thoughts but to avoid them altogether.

'Dear, you do sound a bit distracted. Are you sure there's nothing wrong? Anything I can do?'

'No. Look, I've got something I must do right now but I'll get Jake to phone as soon as I see him.'

As soon as I see him. Would his mother notice the odd phraseology, that he had not said 'as soon as he gets in'. Would it in some ill-defined way give her an inkling of the truth, some vague preparation for what he would soon say?

After he had replaced the receiver on its rest, which lay on top of a small pile of books on the bedside table, Jason lay back on the bed, waiting for the despair and disbelief to subside, knowing they would not. Somewhere, deep within his stomach, his heart, his soul, a small cold knot waited to explode.

He knew of no unhappiness on Kat's part. They had been married for ten years and he still loved her. Until just under an hour ago he had thought the feeling fully reciprocated. Fruitlessly he searched for clues to what had happened and found none. They rarely rowed and when

they did the storm passed fairly quickly. It occurred to him now that perhaps he had been too complacent, had taken his marriage too much for granted, but if so then there had been no warning signals that he could recall.

He was surprised to find himself prowling the room in circles, having no recollection of rising from the bed or of what he had been thinking. He glanced at the clock. Two hours ago he had been turning into his drive, his mind on Angus Gaskill. Two hours ago desertion was something that happened only to other people, to the Ed Deacons of this world not to the Jason Kirks. Two hours ago he could pity from afar.

The two hours became three and Jason had twice thought he was hearing Kat's car turn into the drive when the telephone rang again. He picked it up reluctantly, preparing to tell his mother the truth, to absorb her distress and her questions, to prevent her making any precipitate journey from Dorset.

'Jason? I'm sorry. I know it must have been a shock but I didn't want a scene, especially with Jake and Leah there.'

He found he was shaking though now it was with anger not grief.

'Why? What have I done to you or the children that I deserve this?'

'Nothing. It's just not the same any more.'

'Is there someone else?' He heard the fear in his own voice as he suddenly grasped at the only explanation which might make any sense.

'No, no one at all. It's just not the same.'

'Where are you?'

'I can't tell you yet. I don't want you coming here until the children are settled.'

'For God's sake, Kat, they're mine too. You can't just take them and not tell me where they are.'

'I will tell you, but not now. If you need me I'm still on the same mobile. I'm sorry, Jason, really sorry. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you.'

Alice in Wonderland, thought Jason, Alice in bloody Wonderland. He listened to the dialling tone for some seconds before accepting that Kat had cut the connection. Almost immediately the phone rang again and he answered its summons to explain why his son would not be able to talk to his grandmother that evening.

Much later he found himself back in the bedroom, swaying towards the bed, unsolaced by the concentration he had forced from himself to address the Year Twelve essays, by the routine of preparing and clearing up a meal he did not eat, by the over-indulgence in red wine for which, never having been able to hold an excess of drink, he knew he would pay in the morning.

In the bathroom he had looked around at the emptiness, at the space where Leah's huge cat-shaped sponge used to sit, at the slightly dirty shelf where Kat had kept her make-up, at the bare corner where the bath met the wall and which used to be occupied by Jake's plastic battleship. Once in bed he pulled the duvet over his head to shut out the silence.

The same silence woke him before the alarm clock had a chance to do so and he sat up abruptly, sure that he had overslept, that everyone else had already left for school. As his memory suddenly supplied the true explanation he sank back, not wanting to get up at all, eager only to shirk the day ahead and to withdraw from the complexities thrust upon him from a new and unwelcome routine. He pushed back the duvet and placed his unwilling feet on the carpet. A warm, furry body began to weave around his ankles and he looked down in surprise.