

The police car tagged the ambulance all the way to the village. There wasn't much call for them out here in the silent hills. Normally their attention was pulled greedily to the more populated areas of Keswick and Cockermouth, sometimes Windermere.

The older of the two policemen hated anything involving death: he was probably in the wrong job really. His partner watched him. Could feel his nervousness, his jaw set tight as his gloved hands sheathed the wheel. Young people, middle-aged people, old people, it didn't matter: he said death always made him think of his own kids, and the frailty of life.

"It gets to you," he said. "When you've got kids. Life just becomes more precious somehow."

But the younger policeman, still childless, said that was nonsense. Whether you had children of your own or not you could always feel the cold blunt end of a death. The worst thing was having to look into a relative's eyes and see that what you had to tell them was so impossible it stopped time, it defied everything. And no matter how old the person had been, there was always something momentous about life coming to an end.

"It's the only certainty," he told his partner. "Especially in our line of work."

They already knew this was another death. And the younger policeman knew he was always the one who had to do the dirty jobs, always the one who had to deal with sadness.

The ambulance in front of them slowed as it approached the village, its wheels turning mournfully in respect; its mute sirens useless now and cold above their heads. The policemen followed

until they stopped behind the ambulance and turned off the engine. This was what they were paid for.

“Come on,” the younger officer said. “Let’s get it over with.”

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This was probably the loneliest place on earth right now. And that wasn’t what Rachel had expected. She took off her coat and laid it on a barstool. Hitched her shoulder bag back over her arm as it repeatedly fell forward. The pub was dark inside. It smelled of stale beer and Rachel could see a wet patch on the carpet where someone had already spilled a drink. She wondered for a moment what she was doing here.

She’d promised herself at work that she wouldn’t cry today: she knew her boss was useless with anything like that, and it was almost as if he resented her having the previous day off for the funeral. Even for someone so close to her. But while he was out for his lunch a simple memory brought back a tear.

A girl from the bakery was browsing the shelves of the bookshop and gently put a hand to Rachel’s elbow, asking if she was all right.

“It’s fine, thank you,” Rachel said. “It’s just...” she could hardly make the words happen. Did that mean she hadn’t come to terms with it yet?

“It’s OK,” the girl said. “You don’t have to tell me what it is...” Then a smile brightened the girl’s face and she said, “Listen, me and some of the others from the shops are going for a drink after work tonight. Not for long, just the pub over the road. Why don’t you come with us?”

Rachel felt better; she thought it was the only genuine piece of kindness she’d received in these past couple of days.

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She went straight over to the pub at 5.30. The girl from the bakery was standing there by the bar with about six others, all still wearing uniforms with name tags pinned to their breasts. She said hello to Rachel and introduced her around the small crowd. But within five minutes they were talking amongst themselves, the ease of previous conversations and an old intimacy binding them together. No one really knew Rachel here, and no one talked to her much after that. Standing in the pub, Rachel felt hopelessly out of place. She was forced to buy drinks to gain attention. Slinking up to the other girls, feeling like a fraud.

In the village everyone knew her, but there was too much sympathy. Only now, sitting on her own, did she realise how powerful, how meaningful, every close death can be. She didn't want sympathy, and she didn't want her own thoughts to be the only ones echoing around her head. Death was in the local newspapers again this week, as it always was, but it was different today. This time it had taken someone so close to her.

What was it she wanted? Company, not sympathy. A new start. Although she hadn't come here to drown her sorrows, she now took a long sip of her Bacardi and coke and realised she had just emptied her third glass in one gulp.

So she lined up a row of drinks for the girls from the bakery and the café, in the hope that they wouldn't leave her there alone. Maybe they'd even let her join in with their jokes, their tireless laughing. She stayed close to them while they drank.

Rachel tilted her body towards the others, trying to feel their warmth, trying to catch some of it for herself. Like a virus, she thought. Could happiness be infectious like that? Could Rachel feel it rub from their bodies onto hers? Could she be like these women?

Rachel told herself that this was the place she shouldn't feel

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lonely. At least there were always people in the pub, always voices, bodies, smiles and eyes. But now they too were talking about a death, gossiping about the headlines in the paper. The last thing she wanted to talk about.

She had known she would miss her when she died, but she hadn't counted on the loneliness. Hadn't realised she would feel quite like this. It was even worse that her neighbours had wanted to blame her; even though the police didn't see it that way.

She was the one who would miss her gran the most. She was missing her more than she expected.

*

This was probably the loneliest place on earth right now.

It was forsaken and desolate place. A place that no one else can understand. A frozen place. The way it feels to be blamed for someone else's death, when it was someone so close. It is enough to make anyone numb. Enough to make you shut down.

It is enough to make anyone want to push every thought, every creeping memory, far away from their mind, away from their heart.

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Six months later. Over the hills and down. A secret like a bone hides like a pebble beneath the water. Its ripples are no longer visible on the surface. Other pebbles from the shore have clothed it, covered it, and forgotten it. But part of the secret, a whisper from cold, buried bones to heated flesh, still reaches out over the boggy landscape. The secret flies in the wind. A fragment of a death. It catches in the eyes of boy meets girl. The secret swirls in a pint glass, unseen, tasteless. It sparks between bodies and mouths that kiss.

*

It was Wednesday. The hump. Slap bang in the middle of the week. Somehow, the wrong day to get drunk. But Rachel didn't care about that.

Now she only thought about two things. Forgetting her grief in the pub every night looking for an antidote to loneliness, and wondering how she would get her body up for work the next morning.

She left the bookshop where she worked in Kendal, turned the key in the door and dropped the silver bundle into her bag. She stepped over the road, brushed her arm against the edge of the toyshop on the corner, and felt her body relax, but not her bones sigh, as she entered the pub opposite.

She went up to the narrow bar. She could see the square opening of floor space where the toilets and the fruit machine were, where girls in short skirts and men in old jeans sang karaoke to an unmoved audience. Rachel drank at the bar on her own.

She watched as a woman took the microphone by the toilets

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and began to sing. Opposite, on the floor space, the woman's friend started dancing. Around her, the air and the ground where her feet moved were empty. A woman singing and her friend dancing, and everybody pretending they weren't paying them a grain of notice.

Beside Rachel someone coughed and ordered a pint. If she had been behind the bar she would have certainly thought about asking him for ID. The smell of the amber beer rose as the barmaid angled a glass against a pump. The lad paid his money over the bar, and drank in the creamy top of his pint. He turned to look at Rachel. She was watching the woman sing and the friend dance.

"If only they knew what they looked like, eh?" he said.

The music was loud, so she had to shout back to him, which she found ridiculous. Nearly didn't bother. "Well, at least they're having a good time," she answered.

"Oh?" he said. "So aren't you?"

Rachel looked at him. Sized him up. Not bad. Not brilliant, but not bad. He was young, anyway, that was one thing. That was different. She doubted she'd had one as young as this.

And no. Rachel wasn't having a good time.

She moved closer to him, smiled, and said, "Well, not yet, I'm not."

*

All her searching. Her scouring of people to find a warm place. Rachel Murdoch, unplanned daughter of an unplanned daughter, caught in the struggle of trapped women, couldn't know that men would all be cold too. No love here. Never any love.

It was dark and cold in the bedroom. Rachel had forgotten all

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about the heating when they came in. She'd stumbled through the door of her old terrace, didn't turn a light on or lock the door or anything. Her holding onto a scrunch of his coat, trying to keep her balance; him laughing at how drunk, how hopeless she was. Spilling into the house like beans.

She had, like she always had, the tiniest moment of regret as she lay down with this man. Mainly because she always thought about her gran and granddad and how they once occupied these rooms, how this had once been their house. Their bodies so blurred and melded together, their features a perfect mime of one another, sometimes it was hard to tell them apart. Fifty years of faithfulness blending them. They even became the same shade of grey. And here was Rachel, their only grandchild, throwing away their memories, and her own mind, giving away her body. Again and again. Her grandparents would be turning if either of them had a grave. She knew it. She was beginning to feel it drag on her, the feeling old and pointless. So many men.

They weren't all young, but this one, who hadn't bought Rachel a single drink tonight in the pub (why did she decide to bring this one home?) was the youngest so far. She'd wondered if that would make a difference. She'd hoped his innocence, his unbroken heart, his unshaped cynicism would mean something.

It hadn't.

He still did the same things, moved in the same way. Their limbs a tangle of slippery bone, cold and impatient. Showed her no tenderness. It was warm for a brief moment. Between them. Then he told her a story, his arm holding her limply as if they'd been thrown together and he had no choice.

It was a story that had spark, that scared her; woke her. It was about a woman who had a dream that she was going to be attacked by the bloke she was with.

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“Are you making this up?” Rachel asked.

He shrugged. But she could see his smile in the darkness, his big mouth, his teeth shining.

Rachel drew her body away from him slightly and tried to look into his eyes. She didn't like the way he was talking. Realised, stupidly, that he could be anyone, could do anything.

“But she killed him first and dumped his body in a lake. Buttermere.”

Buttermere. On that first night Rachel had gone to the pub after work, the girls from the other shops had been talking about what had happened in Buttermere. That day when it was the last thing in the world she wanted to talk about.

“You think that's all right though, don't you?” he said. “Because she thought he was going to kill her.”

“Depends,” she said.

“On...?”

“On whether the bloke was really going to kill her. It's never *right*, is it?” she said. “But I suppose circumstances—”

“Exactly. Circumstances. And maybe she killed him by accident and then she just didn't know what to do.”

“Oh yeah,” said Rachel. Wishing he would shut up now.

“But he didn't *know* he was going to.”

“What?”

“The bloke who was killed. He didn't know he was going to kill her.”

Rachel was relieved by a tiny slip in his tone, putting the story back out into the past, and she didn't answer. She pushed herself down in the bed again, under the duvet that was sealed in a cover she'd had God knows how long, that she'd washed and hung on the line so many times the material had rubbed itself into tiny bobbles as if it was trying to escape bit by bit. She slid like a knot

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on a wire, back between the boy's arm and his chest. She liked this place best of all. When she got to lay herself alongside someone.

In the darkness Rachel could feel his breath.

"I bet she wasn't sorry though," he muttered.

Why did he have to bring that girl up again?

His flesh was sighing next to her. But Rachel couldn't sleep. Why had he told her that story? She was still awake when he woke quickly and made a stupid remark about his mother being worried, which Rachel sneered at. He wasn't *that* young.

And then he left. He hadn't even stayed for twenty minutes after. Pulled on his trousers in the darkness, fastened his shirt and carried his coat over his arm. But Rachel was relieved he was going, and taking his stories with him.

She listened as he ran down the old, steep staircase, the tatty worn carpet dirt grey under his shoes, then out the front door, the slam of the wood making the chain and the letterbox chime together. She remembered his face for a short while after as she lay in her bed, staring at the sky through open curtains. But by the time she got up the next morning, it was all but gone.

Rachel had tiny, bulbous tears in her eyes when she ran for the bus that morning. No idea why. Why should she care if the boy didn't even stay? She was actually glad when he had gone.

She knew he wouldn't come back, they never did, and she didn't want him to, but they usually at least stay till the morning creeps over the sky. Then they leave. They always leave. Everybody, she thought, always leaves.

She stuck her arm out like a cyclist turning a corner as she slowed down to meet the bus. Felt exposed doing it. She could feel the skin of her face burn like a deep dream while she handed her money to the driver. Spoke her destination. And watched him as he ignored everything about her.

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Was she even there?

On the bus to Kendal, alone, nothing had ever felt so cold. She watched the diving roads turn, sleet throwing itself recklessly against the bus. And surprised herself by thinking about her mother, even more so, her father. Far away from her now.

“Well,” Rachel’s mum had said before they went, “You’ll still be able to visit, it’s not as if we’ll be on the other side of the world.”

Disconnected from their responsibilities. Having a life somewhere. Trying to have the life they’d never been able to have here. Forgetting Rachel and everything else they’d left behind.

Rachel wished, sometimes, pathetically, that she could do the same. Just forget it. This stupid place. This hole. Forget everything and start again. Maybe somewhere new. Or maybe just with someone. But she never did. Couldn’t. This was her home, this lame village. She hadn’t left when she had the chance and now *things* seemed to tie her here. Like guy ropes. People and her memories of them covering her like polythene.

Rachel couldn’t remember the face of the boy from last night at all now. She was trying, but it had become a shape moving under water. As for his name, she was no longer sure if she’d ever known that in the first place. She sighed into the glass of the bus window. She was getting too old for this.

Kendal greeted Rachel as it does every morning, as if welcoming her with open arms. Rachel got off the bus and stood with her hand rummaging in her bag for a moment. She felt like it was the end of something. The end of so many men. Can’t do this anymore. And anyway, this one scared her. Who knows what a man might be capable of? She felt a rush all over her body as the slots of reality connected. What had she been expecting to find? It was always the same. Every man was the same. They couldn’t give her back what was missing.

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She pulled a small packet of contraceptive pills from a zipped flap in her bag. Looked at them for a moment. Her backup. An innocent little tray of white pills that tricked her body over and over again. And her womb never got the joke, never realised.

She stuffed them into the bin by the bus stop and walked away, on to the book shop where she worked. Onto Finkle Street.

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And now five more years have gone by. The water still covers the bone. But the currents unsettle it in its resting place. Suppressing it so its deformities feel even more mis-shaped every day. It wants to rise to the surface. It needs to come out into the open to join with the chipped and sharp fragment of itself which is still out there somewhere. Only then can the dark secret heal itself.

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