

THE DYING TIME

My mother's shoulders slump as she jitters on the doorstep. She's much frailer than last year, yet she hugs me hard enough for two. I'm taken aback by the strength of her. She holds me for that wee bit longer as I embrace her lightly, feeling the sharp angle of her bones. She's always embarrassed when she lets go.

'Like yer coat. It looks warm. Soft too,' she says, as she presses the fabric between her fingers.

'It's good tae come home, Mum.'

She knows the truth of it but she bites her tongue. To give it words would make it real. Sometimes the silence is all we've got left to hold on to. She knows I'll never rest. It's hard for me to come back, but it's harder not to.

She always suspected that I'd leave one day. From the day I was born she hid her suspicion as if it were a spell of her own making.

'You're hoarse,' she says, and reaches to touch my throat.

'Aye, it's been a bugger tae shift.'

I fold into the warmth of the kitchen and that smell of her. I remember nights with my head on her chest, the sound of her heart. If I pressed closer still, I fancied I heard the swish of the distant sea. Then she'd croon to me, her voice

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soft as a bee - *my changeling*, she'd say, *my bonnie changeling*. She'd brush my face and feel the contours of my skull, her hands a balm to calm my tears. Everything seems the same as last year, there's nothing new on show. Nothing to move the conversation to the present – Is that a new picture over the fireplace? Is that you treated yourself to different curtains? The room remains a scrapbook of family life, every object in it a memory that roots us both to worldly things, to the past.

She rattles about in the cupboard till she finds it – my special cup. A bairns cup, painted with Easter chickens. There's one with rabbits too. Before she closes the door I see the tips of their ears way back in the corner shelf behind all the auld cracked, tea-stained mugs. It's not just memories, she hoards everything. 'Mind the sweetie shop where we bought this? They used tae inject coloured dye intae the hen's eggs.'

We have this conversation every year but I still smile with the memory, and because it pleases her. I'm remembering the two of us outside the place, noses squashed flat against the misted pane watching wee fluff balls on legs, pink, blue and green, chirping and bobbing through the chocolate Easter eggs and plastic daffodils. I'd have been five or six then.

'Yer faither said it was an abomination against nature.'

'Aye, he did.' She's rustling the biscuit wrapper, struggling to open the packet.

'Can I give you a hand?'

'Naw. You away and sit by the fire,' she snaps the words as if I've offended her.

'You're lookin peely-wally.'

I watch her swirl Granny McLachlan's china-blue teapot with boiling water, warming it before she shakes in the loose tea.

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'Mibby we'll read the leaves later,' she says, her slow smile lighting up her face. My mother has lived her life in a world of myths and faeries. She would never share these things with him, my father. I was the one caught in her thrawl. She fed my imagination so I believed that anything was possible. I often thought that she'd wished for a girl. She told me that at the birth, before they removed the caul from my face, she could have sworn I was a girl child, caught behind the veil. The scars on my forehead were a sign of how precious I was. *It's the spaewife*, the other mothers would whisper at the school gate as they pulled their bairns closer.

The light is fading now. With the moon reflecting on the snow it's darker inside than out. She lights the lamp at the window before she sits by the fire, stoked high with logs. It's going to be a long night.

'There'll be a drap of snaw the nicht,' she says, 'Ye might no get back.'
She kens that could never be true, but I've a notion it amuses her to say it. We sit in silence, sipping the hot tea. She still brews it as black as treacle, the way he always liked it. The fire cracks, spraying a haze of sparks that fizzle out on the sooty cobwebs below the mantelpiece.

Once upon a time, I'd felt safe in this room. Even though nothing in it has changed over the years, hopelessness and blame still shadow-box in the air. She still has crayoned drawings on the front of the fridge and Tiddlywinks and Snakes & Ladders on top of the kitchen cupboard, the dug-eared and faded boxes happed in dust.

She puts on her specs to better size me up, as if she's checking to see if I've changed much since last year. Her eyes are teary, but there's also a smug

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defiance there, that she'd known the truth of it all along. My being here is proof enough.

'They wanted tae cut doon the tree last month,' she says.

Her lips purse together, eyes locked on mine, waiting for my reaction.

'Why?'

'Gale wiped oot Glensith wood, bar a few stunted dwarf trees. A hunner an ten recorded up on the top.'

'So they think it's dying, our tree . . .?'

'They never said.' She leaves it to hang in the air so I weave around it.

'How have things been for you, Mum, really?'

'Ye see it all.'

'and . . .?'

'It wis a grand summer till Michaelmas, when auld Mrs McRorie passed on.'

' . . . and the tree?'

'She was a guid neighbour over the years.'

'I can tell you'll miss her.'

'Aye, but I telt them – you take that tree doon ower ma deid body.'

'Maybe it's time, if it's rotten?'

'If it wisnae fur that tree the hoose roof wid blaw aff.'

My mother dreamed below the Scot's pine tree most of her life. The canopy sheltered the house. It choked the rones with needles. Some nights I'd fight sleep to count the cones that thudded on the slate roof before they rumbled over the guttering to lie in the soft grass. I remember when the darkness of winter lifted how she'd thread pieces of broken glass and old bottles onto string, and hang them on the tree to catch the scant, watery sunlight. As a bairn I'd sit

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in its shade and watch them twirl and sparkle – green, blue and silver. I'd listen as the wind funnelled through the mouth of the bottles, playing tunes, light as air - Faerie voices, she said.

Then there was the swing my father made for me, the seat hewn from a stump with snagged rope fibres that grazed my hands till they bled. For hours I'd swing on it, trying to touch the sky. The swing is long gone now.

She's back in the kitchen running water and scraping carrots.

'I'm pittin the soup on,' she says, 'You can jist content yersel.'

I get up from the chair, 'I'll away out for a smoke.'

'Wi your chest?' I shuffle out the door to the sound of her tutting. 'It'll chill ye tae the bone,' she shouts after me. She knows I will be under the tree.

Outside the earth is hard crusted, the sky bloated with snow. There's something about the winter when the snow comes. It smudges out everything. Every curve, angle, bend and rise used to orientate by is skimmed white. Farm sheds, furrowed fields, grizzled stane dykes – all taken.

My father, a man of the elements, hated wind and rain in equal measure. I'd hear him out on the high pasture howling like a wild, demented thing, cursing the damned evil weather and the unyielding land, while I'd be warm indoors – *'hingin oan tae yer mither's skirts as bloody usual.'* Fear and guilt and all manner of other things curdled inside me. Over time, failure to measure up balled in my gut, mutated, and became a living thing.

I recall on the worst of nights, my mother on her knees on the cold stone floor, praying for his safe return from the hill – that's what a shepherd's wife did. I tried to slow my hammering heart and prayed for the exhausted stillness of

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dawn when dark thoughts were washed clean. The morning hung, scared and waiting.

With a rattle of the latch, Mist, his old collie dog, would slink through the door. The beast had different coloured eyes, one grey, one brown, and a marled coat stiff with glaur. It would give me a queer look as if it knew what I'd been thinking. The big man would appear in its wake bringing the chill into the room with him.

Yet, I knew another man, a man I rarely saw, who told me once how he loved the snow that came at the back of the dying time. When it thawed, he said the land bloomed newborn. I'd watch from the window at his trauchle through the snowdrifts as he headed home, haloed by the winter glow, him and the land as one. He said - *you'll understand it someday. It's in your blood, son, a part of you.*

It doesn't matter if the landscape is buried under snow or mizzled in rain. When I'm here, it's him that's in my head. I only come back for her. Yet, I think about him the most. My cigarette smoke hangs in the frozen air as I lean against the wall. The stone is cold and rough against my back. The path beneath me feels no weight from my tread. It's worn with his feet, that fierce man that called himself my father. At the gable end, the silvered branches of the Scot's pine stretch out further than I can remember, the thick trunk scarred deep with height rings. Each year he carved my height into the bark with his libbing-knife. *One day I'd be a giant like him*, he said, *strong as a tree*. But, even standing on tiptoes with my arms stretched to the sky, the line was beyond my reach. The milky sap that bled from the tree weakened it with each cut he made. *A cuckoo*

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in the nest, I heard him say to my mother one day. She shook her head and smiled in that quiet way that she had.

In a mild winter, the tree would be busy with rooks by now, and their hoarse yammering, but not tonight. There's only the tick of the ice tightening its grip around the branches. The laddered slits gaping on the trunk giving in to nature's vain attempt to heal.

I float in with the cold air, back to the kitchen where she's there by the stove, her cheeks pink with steam. The sharp aroma of leek lingers as she stirs. The pulley over the sink hangs with twists of onion pulled from the garden as well as dried meadow flowers and herbs. She always had a way with these things, cordials and cures and magic potions – the glamour. I'd be there with her at the gathering time on the hillside, her deft fingers picking, careful to leave enough for another day.

I think of my father's hands. Hands strong enough to lift then sling a yowe across his back and not break sweat. Hands mired with the land, scarred and frozen, the colour of elderberries. He'd come in from the hill and hold them in the fire till the life came back into them enough that he could hold a cup – but he never held me. I thought he'd thaw one day, and find the tenderness that would open his arms and release a space that I could crawl into. Still, it was him that morning that stood amidst the birdsong and the gorse dazzle from the hill; it was him who cut me down from the tree. It was him who carried me into the house and laid me gently on the kitchen table. It was him who tried to breathe his essence into my lifeless body until he had nothing more to give.

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I hear his cough at the door now as he dunts snow from his boots. The noise vibrates through the floorboards, a sign. She raises her eyes from the firelight, leans forward as if to touch me one last time. My body spins through the air and I'm on the ceiling hanging in the corner shadows like a bat. Beyond the window the snow blizzard is swirling in twists and spirals. I can barely see the tree now. I watch my father as he ducks low to clear the door lintel. He's not as tall as I remember. His shoulders are not as broad. As his eyes adjust to the glow I can see him grappling to get a sense of her mood before he speaks.

'Well, did the boy come, lass?'

'Aye, as expected.'

'That's fine. You'll be content now . . .'

He eases his frame into a fireside chair. The ice weeps from his beard.

'Hush,' she says.

They watch the flames, listening to the rhythmic dripping as he thaws.

'Sometimes things are meant to be,' he lands the words gently.

'A ken that.'

'At least the sheep are doon. Nane deid.'

'I better put yer supper on then.'

She rises, wraps her cardigan tighter around herself, and with a final glance across the room she makes her way to the sink.