

Shadows and Scars

I pulled up outside the house, and peered up at the broken panes, rotten sills and nailed up letter box. Even the 'For Sale' sign hung limply from the board.

"What are we doing here?" Jenny asked as she dabbed her wet eyes.

What indeed, I thought, as I felt my chest tighten and my breath become shallow.

There was a loud knock on the passenger window and Jenny screamed.

"If you're stopping, turn your engine off. We don't need all that pollution from your exhaust pipe around here," an old woman shouted.

"Hello Mrs Simpson!" I said, smiling at the familiar face that hid behind the lines and wrinkles.

The old lady squinted then made the sign of the cross, "Isn't it just like looking at a ghost."

My smile quivered. Should I tell her that he haunted me in the mirror every day?

"Well, himself will want to see it with his own two eyes. In you come," she said.

"A ghost of who?" Jenny asked as I got out of the car. "Where the hell are you going?"

I passed under the shadow of the house that I had run away from twenty two years ago and stepped into the house next door. I could just make out the old anaglypta wallpaper that was now hiding behind a gallery of framed photographs, set out like a family tree that included faces of people I'd never met.

"Come on then, lad. Let's be having a look at you."

I paused and inhaled deeply on the pungent and familiar smell of the pipe smoke that floated out of the living room, and I walked into the past.

I was back to being a scared eight year old boy, hiding in the old shed in our garden, cradling my limp arm. I heard footsteps and, afraid my father had found me, I wet myself. The hot gush of urine quickly turned cold in the winter's air. My body began to tremble

causing the half empty tins of paint to rattle. Then the aroma of Mr Simpson's pipe drifted through the wooden slats and swaddled me like a blanket, and I heard him say those very same words.

"Come on then, lad. Let's be having a look at you."

"Who are these people? Where are we?" Jenny's voice brought me back; her frown asked a hundred questions.

This was hardly her part of town, and I had never told her that this street used to be mine.

"There's so much you need to know," I told her.

The old man stood up shakily, leaning heavily on his armchair. I remembered how we used to lie at his feet, his sons Stephen and Billy and me, vying over the warmest spot in front of the fire, and listen as he read us articles from the newspaper. Sport, politics and the economy, nothing was off limits. I smiled at the memory of the lively debates, and realised that they weren't that far removed from the way I held team meetings now.

I leant down to pat the old man's back as we shook hands and immediately softened my trademark backslap as I felt his small shoulders wince. Was this the same man who used to pick me up and carry me to safety?

I introduced Jenny and Mrs Simpson offered us all sherry. Jenny was quick to decline, her hand moving to her still flat stomach. But tea, she said, she'd love a cup of tea.

"I've got the keys. Shall we go and take a look?" Mr Simpson asked.

I looked down the street as he fumbled with the keys. A metallic taste flooded my mouth and, despite the cold, I wiped beads of sweat from my forehead and top lip.

As I walked through my old front door, I instinctively rubbed my left arm that had once been fractured when my father had slammed the door against it. I side stepped down the narrow hallway and remembered the day I had found my mother slumped at the bottom of the

stairs. Mr Simpson was there then too. He answered my cries as I tried to wake her, then prised me off her and held me close when the undertaker arrived.

I passed through the door into the small kitchen and leant against the chipped Formica topped units. They creaked loudly in complaint. Even they were weary from the years of misuse.

I thought of my own kitchen, the floor to ceiling cupboards, the marble worktop and the state of the art ovens that had necessitated an online tutorial to understand how to use them. I wondered how we'd ever shared a space as limited as this.

"They say you lose the magic of childhood the day you realise everything was so small." Mr Simpson said as he observed my glances.

I laughed so loudly it hurt my throat. "There wasn't much magic to my childhood, Mr Simpson."

I stepped back into the hall and looked into the living room that was strewn with empty bottles and framed by damp riddled walls.

"Is she expecting?" he nodded his head towards the adjoining wall, through which I could hear the dull muffle of Jenny's voice.

The pregnancy had been a shock. From the day we met, Jenny had been clear. No babies. She had a career, and babies would not be compatible. I agreed, happily. She never asked for my reasons and I was relieved that I didn't have to explain.

Mr Simpson didn't need an explanation either.

He lit his pipe, sucked on it, and then blew out the smoke. I inhaled the scent, like a calming essential oil.

They'd often talked about what would bring me back, he said. It hadn't been the funeral; they figured I'd had my lot after my mother's. They knew from the estate agent that I wasn't interested in the house. And in twenty two years I'd never returned to visit a friend.

I mumbled an apology as my cheeks burned.

The old man laughed. “Do you think I wanted to see you back here without some good news?”

I looked out of the dirty cracked window.

“Is it good news?” he eventually asked.

I opened the door to the yard and walked as far as the limited space permitted.

There had been times when I thought about having a child. Watching the outpouring of love that friends displayed for their own offspring occasionally triggered a dormant paternal gene that the role of godparent didn't satisfy. I mentioned it to Jenny from time to time, casually referencing amusing anecdotes about our godchildren, but she would always roll her eyes and pretend to yawn. Even our friends would tell us having kids wasn't always fun. And didn't I know that better than anyone?

Then, this morning, as we sat waiting for our appointment, Jenny had cried and told me she didn't want to go through with the termination. She wanted to keep the baby.

She couldn't explain, she said through her tears, it just felt right. She could make it work. We could. Couldn't we?

We walked back to the car and had driven away in silence, and I didn't stop until I arrived back here.

“There are enough damaged children in the world, don't you think?” I said to my old neighbour as he stood by the back door and tapped his pipe on the wall, causing a scattering of tobacco to fall to the ground.

“Billy had his third not so long back.” he said, seeming to regain some of his lost stature. “Two girls and a boy he has now. Six, four and almost one. Lovely little things. They visit us all the time. They bought me books, you know, about babies and kids and what to do. I'll

give them to you. We didn't have anything like that in my day, but now, there's an answer for everything in one of them books."

I looked up at my bedroom window as I remembered the night my dad had found me reading after lights out. He had just come back from the pub. He dragged me out of bed and said he would show me what books were good for.

In the morning, I found that the pages had stuck together with my blood.

"I'm not much of a reader these days," I told him.

Mr Simpson slid the pipe into his coat pocket and shuffled towards me. I noticed that he was still wearing his slippers. He reached up and placed his hand on my shoulder, steadying himself, steadying me.

I closed my eyes to contain the burning tears as I charted my memories against the scars and lumps on my body, like an Ordnance Survey map of the abuse I'd suffered.

"Happen you don't need to read the books," he said. "If anyone knows how not to do it, it's you."

The reassuring weight of his hand reminded me that my father hadn't been the only influence in my childhood. I couldn't chart my life without mapping the neighbourhood friendships that had helped me become the man I was, and the father I could be.

The knot of sickness that had settled in the pit of my stomach that morning began to unwind. Like a small butterfly breaking out of its chrysalis, I felt a flutter of excitement.

I peered over the yard wall into the Simpson's kitchen and saw Jenny at the table with a cup and saucer in front of her. Was it the low lying autumnal sun playing a trick or did Jenny look different? I could swear she was glowing.

As I watched her smiling and chatting to the old lady she had never met or even heard of before today, I felt the butterfly extend its wings and take flight, creating a wave of joy.

I looked up at the house again and nodded as the autumnal sun finally reached the damp bricks and chased the shadows away.

I pictured the tiny cells that had begun the magical journey to become a child, one that would depend on me to love and protect them.

“I’m scared,” I admitted.

“Pfft!” he scoffed. “That doesn’t make you special. That just makes you a father.”

He reached for his pipe, stuffed in the tobacco with his stained thumb and lit it, sucking heavily.

“Shall we go next door and tell Kitty the news?”

I inhaled deeply on the comforting smoke again and toyed with the idea of taking it up. Not that I would, of course. Everyone knew it was dangerous to smoke around children. Instead, I’d come back for a soothing hit from time to time.

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s do it.”